

EX-RACIST TO TEACH ANTI-HATE MEETING

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A decade ago, Floyd Cochran was the face and voice of one of America's most notorious white supremacist groups--the Aryan Nation.

As director of propaganda, Cochran recruited members into a community that espouses white superiority, anti-Semitism and homophobia. It also believes that African-Americans and other people of color are subhuman.

But in 1992, after his son was shunned by the Aryan Nation due to a birth defect, Cochran left the group. He works to counter hate and urges others, especially youths, to do the same.

Cochran will be the keynote speaker Friday night at a two-day conference, Building Democracy 2000, designed to teach individuals how to devise community-based responses to hate groups and their activities.

The conference will be held Friday and Saturday in the Ramada Plaza Hotel at O'Hare International Airport, 6600 N. Mannheim Rd. in Rosemont. It is the second in three years sponsored by the Center for New Community in Oak Park, a non-profit, faith-based organization committed to countering messages of bigotry and violence in the U.S. and Europe.

"It's the job of community, civic and religious leaders to make sure they are building strong moral barriers against hate," said David Ostendorf, director of the center.

Last year, the center joined six communities in Illinois and Indiana to hold a march in the weeks after Benjamin Smith's deadly shooting spree over the 4th of July weekend. Former Northwestern University basketball coach Ricky Byrdsong and a Korean graduate student in Bloomington, Ind., were killed. Nine people were injured. The spree ended with Smith fatally shooting himself.

A documentary film about the march, "Continuing the Journey Against Hate," will be shown for the first time Friday at 2:30 p.m. The film captures a confrontation between the marchers and Matthew Hale, leader of the World Church of the Creator, a white supremacist group that Smith followed.

After the film, Byrdsong's widow, Sherialyn, and Rev. Stephen Anderson of Decatur, an African-American minister who was one of Smith's gunshot victims, will discuss the importance of direct responses by communities to counter bigotry.

"Communities respond when there is an incident. The reality is, this work is going on all the time. We must be keenly aware of this danger in our midst," Ostendorf said.

A special "Journey Against Hate" award will be presented to East Peoria for taking a stand against Hale and his group, which is headquartered there.

The proliferation of hate groups is also a growing concern in Europe, specifically Germany and Great Britain as well as Nordic countries such as Sweden and Norway.

International leaders will discuss racism and xenophobia in Europe and the dramatic rise of the neo-Nazi movement in Austria under Joerg Haider, former leader of Austria's far-right Freedom Party.

The conference will open Friday at 10 a.m. with the multi-media presentation "Soundtracks to the White Revolution," which will look at the use of hate rock and the Internet by white supremacist groups to recruit young followers.

"We must particularly prepare youth to understand what this movement is all about and how it can be effectively countered," Ostendorf said.

Music is considered the No. 1 recruiting tool of such groups, said Brian Berg, a New Community spokesman.

High school students from Rolling Meadows, Elmhurst and Park Ridge will participate in the conference, as well as students from Loyola University Chicago and colleges and universities in Indiana, Missouri and Ohio.

Registration will not be permitted on the day of the conference. For information, call 708-848-0319.

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