

Interfaith clergy group in Montana counters neo-Nazi hate

A clergy group formed supporting a rabbi in the ski resort town of Whitefish, where white supremacist groups targeted her and other local Jewish people.

by [Kimberly Winston](#) in the [June 6, 2018](#) issue



Francine Roston (left), a rabbi in Whitefish, Montana, leads about 150 people in a Jewish song at an interfaith peace service on April 8 in Kalispell, Montana. RNS photo by Kimberly Winston.

What do you do when anti-Semites, stirred up by a guy you see at the local coffee shop and the gym, send you doctored pictures of your child's face beneath the gates of Auschwitz? When they clog your phone lines with threats to "finish the job" for Hitler and gas you? When they promise to send an army of anti-Semites marching through your town?

If you live in the small ski resort town of Whitefish, Montana—where neo-Nazi Richard Spencer, who has been called “a kind of professional racist in khakis,” has put down roots—you fight back. But rather than match the haters slur for slur, you organize a kind of party for peace, one that draws on the faith traditions present across the Flathead Valley of northwestern Montana.

“I choose love,” sang Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Catholics, Mennonites, Baha’is, Unitarians, and Jews at a community center in the town of Kalispell, about 17 miles south of Whitefish. An informal support group of local clergy, which formed after neo-Nazi attacks on Whitefish, planned the gathering of about 150 people in April and hope to hold interfaith peace services regularly.

“In looking back over the past year and the experience of being terrorized I think we made it through because we felt the support of people across the country and of our neighbors here in the Flathead Valley,” said Francine Roston, rabbi of the [Glacier Jewish Community/B’nai Shalom](#), and one of the main targets of the neo-Nazi attacks. “These ministers felt like if the Jews are being targeted then we are all being targeted and we need to stand up for each other.”

In December 2016, Tanya Gersh, a local real estate agent who is Jewish, and Sherry Spencer, Richard Spencer’s mother and a longtime resident, discussed a piece of property Sherry Spencer owns on Lupfer Avenue in Whitefish. Opponents of her son’s racial ideology had threatened to protest in front of it.

Soon after, someone claiming to be Sherry Spencer wrote a post on Medium saying she felt threatened and harassed by Gersh to sell her property and donate the proceeds to charity as a kind of reparation for her son’s activities. Sherry Spencer has said she disavows her son’s views, which advocate for a whites-only America achieved by what he has called “peaceful ethnic cleansing.”

Richard Spencer, riding a wave of notoriety from his “Hail Trump!” one-armed salute just after the 2016 election, took to his video blog to decry what he saw as abuse of his mother. And Andrew Anglin, founder of the neo-Nazi website the Daily Stormer, which, at the time, had hundreds of thousands of readers, encouraged neo-Nazis to start what they call “doxxing”—extreme attacks, primarily via social media. The doxxing focused on three people in particular: Gersh and her husband, Judah, and Roston.

The attacks were taken seriously by local and national law enforcement. The FBI and Homeland Security officials spoke with the victims. The Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center sent people with experience combating hate. (Spencer did not respond to requests for comment; Anglin's whereabouts are unknown.)

"The worst experience was watching the neo-Nazis discuss the fact that I have children, and that they knew my son's name," Roston said, her already soft voice tapering to a near whisper. "When I believed my children were being threatened, I was terrified. The lowest moment was watching the Holocaust imagery—the yellow star they put on my headshot—and realizing that the Nazi ideology wasn't dead but was alive and thriving online."

The attacks culminated in Anglin calling for a neo-Nazi march on Whitefish on January 16, 2017—Martin Luther King Jr. Day. He promised to bus in "skinheads" to the town of about 7,000 residents.

Whitefish residents, who passed an anti-discrimination ordinance in December 2014 in response to some of Richard Spencer's activities, organized an alternative event they called a "block party." More than 300 people turned out to stand for three hours in minus-15-degree weather to hear pro-diversity speakers and drink matzo ball soup.

The neo-Nazis never materialized in downtown Whitefish. Over the next couple of months, Love Lives Here and other community groups continued their show of support while the neo-Nazi attacks tapered off.

The whole episode caused many in Whitefish to question their relationship to Montana, a state that has historically been a home to multiple white supremacist groups and individuals.

"Whitefish has existed with this knowledge that we live amidst some fundamentalists," said Hilary Shaw, who is Jewish, lives in Whitefish and sits on the board of Montana Human Rights Network. "And we just kind of ignore it and say we are just here to ski and enjoy this gorgeous place. We don't want to think about how not diverse our town is. So I think that is one good thing—people had to stop and own it. They had to learn about the history of white nationalism in their valley."

In the middle of the doxxing, a couple of Christian ministers with congregations in the Flathead Valley reached out to Roston to ask what they could do to help.

“I was so touched and grateful for their support,” she said. “We talked about the need to have more interfaith community support and our concern that our culture has become so polarized.”

Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopal, Unitarian, and Mennonite clergy started meeting once a month with Roston, the only working rabbi in the Flathead Valley.

“Some of us in the Christian community wanted to be intentional about supporting Francine and her community,” said Scott Thompson, leader of Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Kalispell. “Humanity in its various religions and expressions of faith is one body and when one part of the body hurts the whole body hurts.”

The group set a few ground rules for the service: it would not name any single incident or person by name, it would be held in a community space rather than a single house of worship, and it would draw from the various religious traditions present in the valley, even if their clergy had not joined the support group.

The heart of the service was a ritual in which all were invited to come forward and light a single candle from a larger taper, and then add it to those already burning together on a bed of sand.

“A single light by itself can be nice, but it is also vulnerable, exposed, and can be extinguished,” said Andrew Wendle, a Lutheran pastor from nearby Somers, as he lit a taper. “Light can bind and unify. It can draw us in so we can see what we can illuminate together.”

Watching the participants line up to light their candles, Roston, seated in the front row, began to cry.

“We felt very alone during the attacks last winter and in no way did I feel alone in that moment,” she said later. “I felt very supported and affirmed. I am part of something bigger than the Jewish community.”

As a lawsuit brought by one of the Jewish victims in Whitefish proceeds through federal court—a case that could become a redefining landmark in distinguishing protected free speech from unprotected hate speech—leaders are facing the possibility of another attack.

“Of course we are worried,” said Cherilyn DeVries of [Love Lives Here](#), a local anti-bias group. “What white supremacists are trying to do is divide the community by forcing us to see religious and racial differences in people. What this service is doing is turning that on its head. These clergy are using their differences to bring people together rather than divide us.”

In April 2017, the Southern Poverty Law Center filed a [lawsuit](#) on behalf of Tanya Gersh, the Whitefish real estate agent, against the founder of The Daily Stormer in Montana federal court. The lawsuit maintains that the 30 articles Anglin posted on The Daily Stormer calling on readers to harass Gersh invaded her privacy, inflicted emotional distress, and violated Montana’s anti-intimidation act. Gersh is not speaking to media while the lawsuit progresses.

Marc Randazza, Anglin’s lawyer, has indicated he will claim his client’s speech—while abhorrent—is protected under the First Amendment as free speech. But Gersh’s lawyer, John Morrison, said even though the neo-Nazis did not come to Whitefish, their threats were incitement to violence, which is not protected under the First Amendment.

Damon Berry, an assistant professor at St. Lawrence University who has written a book about neo-Nazis and religion, thinks *Gersh v. Anglin* brings the neo-Nazi movement to a crossroads.

“Once a case is decided that says this harassment crosses the free speech line, that means the neo-Nazis can be held accountable,” he said. “And that could spell the beginning of the end of their online harassment.” —Religion News Service

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