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Idaho group warns of racism

TRIB LIVE ANNE MICHAUD | Monday, July 29, 2002 4:00 p.m.

The upswing of organized racist activity in Pennsylvania has so alarmed human rights groups that they kicked off a five-city speaking tour in Pittsburgh on Sunday to teach Pennsylvanians how to fight bigotry. Three men with experience combatting neo-Nazi Aryan Nations in Idaho since 1973 spoke to an audience of about 100 at the University of Pittsburgh. A faction of the Aryan Nations intends to establish a national headquarters in Potter County, north of State College, and hosted a three-day rally this weekend that drew more than 100 Nations members, Posse Comitatus followers, skinheads, Klansmen and hate rock bands. "I want to apologize. When we kicked them out of Idaho, we had no idea they were going to come to Pennsylvania," said Marshall Mend, a businessman and founder of the Kootenai County (Idaho) Human Relations Task Force. The task force and supporters successfully sued Aryan Nations founder Richard Butler and won a \$6.3 million judgment in 2000 that cost him his 40-acre compound in northern Idaho. The compound has been renamed Peace Park, Mend said, but northern Idaho's image has not recovered. "There are still people who will not come to Idaho because they think it's a haven for hatred," Mend said, "and nothing could be further from the truth." The story the Idaho men told about how Aryan Nations established a foothold in their state was chilling. Butler moved near the all-white city of Coeur d'Alene (core-da-leen), and for several years the organization was quiet, holding public speeches from time to time, said Norman Gissel, a lawyer who initiated the successful lawsuit against Butler. The group began to hold meetings to swell their ranks and eventually attracted 300 to 400 active members. Not content with that, Butler began a prison ministry that invited felons who were being released to come to his compound to live for free, Gissel said. The local crime rate soared. Aryan Nations ultimately helped launch The Order, perhaps the most notorious supremacist group in American history, which murdered, robbed banks and counterfeited until its leader Robert Mathews was killed in 1984 in a shoot-out with federal agents. Twenty-two Order members were jailed. Fighting the neo-Nazi groups overtook Gissel's life and the lives of other task force members, Gissel said. "Our job, as we matured into this, consumed us," he said. "Other than our professions and our families, that's all we did for 15 to 20 years was fight the Nazis." "This all-white community has a lot to say about civil rights," he said. Tony Stewart, a political science professor with North Idaho College, the third guest speaker from Idaho, said they made a mistake early on believing that because the group was small it was benign. "Never, never take the position that because there are few of them, they will not do harm," he said.

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realized she set the stage for that in the home," he said. "She told me, 'We used that language at home, particularly against African-Americans.'" George Simmons, regional director of the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission, said a vital step in combatting the spread of hatred is to report incidents to his organization, the American Jewish Committee, the National Conference for Community and Justice or a like group.

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