IDHH Episode Ten: Less Booted More Suited

EPISODE SUMMARY: In this episode we look at the Coalition For Human Dignity’s move to Seattle, the merger with the Northwest Coalition Against Malicious Harassment and financial collapse. We hear reflections on the good, the bad and the ugly, with advice on moving forward today.

Episode Ten features interviews with Devin Burghart, Scot Nakagawa, Eric Ward, Steven Gardiner, Krista, Gillian, M Treloar, Abby Layton, Jonathan Mozzochi and Pete Little.

Northwest Coalition Against Malicious Harassment (NWCAMH) according to Clinton White House Archives, “was created in 1987 in response to the Aryan Nation’s annual meeting near Hayden Lake, Idaho on July 12, 1986. At the same time the Aryan Nation was meeting, over 1,000 people rallied in nearby city parks to celebrate human rights. After the rally, a steering committee was formed to develop a mechanism to maintain on-going efforts against bigotry in the Northwest. The result was NWCAMH, a nonprofit umbrella entity devoted to eradicate discriminatory violence by working in cooperation with human rights organizations, places of worship, law enforcement, grassroots community groups and organized labor. The coalition works with constituents in six states—Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington and Wyoming.” The Northwest Coalition Against Malicious Harassment’s programs provided assistance to victims, organizations, communities, businesses and community leaders to address organized bigotry. In addition, they monitored the activities of groups that harassed individuals because of their race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, national origin or ancestry. Members were taught strategies to challenge bigotry and honor diversity in this nation. The coalition was governed by a 37-member board of directors composed of representatives from the governor’s offices in each of the six states in the northwest region as well as representatives from different community activist groups. Over 200 public and private organizations were affiliated with the coalition.

Bill Wassmuth was born in 1941, one of nine children of a farming family in the tiny central panhandle agricultural community of Greencreek, Idaho. A graduate of St. Thomas Seminary in Kenmore, WA, he served in several parishes before the diocese relocated Wassmuth in 1979 to St Pious X Catholic Church in Coeur d’Alene—two years after the founding of nearby Aryan Nations. Wassmuth became a leader of the Kootenai County Task Force on Human Relations and spoke out frequently against racism, anti-Semitism and sexism. During the summer of 1986, the KCTF invited groups from across the Northwest to a human rights celebration that attracted national attention in response to the annual conference at the Aryan Nations compound. In
what is believed to be a retaliation, on September 15 1986, a pipe bomb blew up in the back of his house. No one was hurt in that bombing or in the other three bombings that same day in Coeur d’Alene, though Wassmuth missed serious injury by inches. Three members of the Aryan Nations were convicted. In 1988 Wassmuth left the priesthood and from there married local artist Mary Frances Durnedinger; they moved to Seattle where Wassmuth became the head of the Northwest Coalition Against Malicious Harassment. He co-authored the book Hate is My Neighbor with Tom Alibrandi, chronicling his experiences in Kootenai County. In a 1994 interview with the Lewiston Tribune, Mr. Wassmuth said,"I would like to get into more of a healing posture and more of a meditative stance. If we are going to make it in our society, we’re going to have to heal bigotry and racism. I would like to be more in direct contact to help change people’s attitudes. It can be done, but I wouldn’t take Richard Butler on as my first client.” Bill Wassmuth died August 27, 2002 in Ellensburg, Wash. He was 61. The Wassmuth Center For Human Rights claims him as their inspiration. He is the subject of Common Courage: Bill Wassmuth, Human Rights and Small-Town Activism, (Caxton Press, 2003) a biography by Andrea Vogt.

ALS or Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (also known as ‘Lou Gehrig’s disease’ after the legendary Yankees first baseman who died of ALS at age 37) is a neurodegenerative neuromuscular disease that has no known cause or cure, though a small percentage of cases have family history of the disease. While some people—notably theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking–live with the disease for years, for most people the prognosis leads to death within two-five years of diagnosis.

Coeur D’Alene is a city in northwest Idaho about 33 miles east of Spokane, Washington with a 90% white population of 52,414 as of 2019. In 1974, white supremacist Richard Butler (see Show Notes Episode 5) moved to the city in order to set up a white homeland, beginning with his 1977 establishment of Aryan Nations and development of a 20-acre property near the town of Hayden Lake, around 10 miles north of the city. Coeur d’Alene population has doubled since 1990, with mostly white people moving in a phenomenon called the ‘Blue Migration’ as described in the 2015 PBS series ‘America By The Numbers episode 103: Our Private Idaho.’ ‘Blue Migration’ refers to the hundreds of white former law enforcement officers who moved starting around 1990 from Los Angeles to Idaho to escape ‘multiculturalism’ and find community among other white Christians who hold similar values permitting prayer in school and controlling gender and sexual expression. According to the Coeur d’Alene tribal website, the name, “Coeur d’Alene” was given to the tribe in the late 18th or early 19th century by French traders and trappers. In French, it means “Heart of the Awl,” referring to the sharpness of the trading skills exhibited by
tribal members in their dealings with visitors. “In the ancient tribal language, members call themselves, “Schitsu’umsh,” meaning “The Discovered People” or “Those Who Are Found Here.”

The Homophobic Violence Documentation Project was a 24-hour hotline initiated by CHD’s Scot Nakagawa and Executive Director of the Lesbian Community Project, the late Donna Red Wing. It was a bare-bones project staffed by one person with volunteer support. The hotline voicemail took calls from citizens victimized by homophobic violence at a time when the Oregon Citizens Alliance (see Show Notes, episode Three) sponsored ballot measures in 1988 and 1992 denying civil rights to LGBTQ people. Mr. Nakagawa and Ms. Red Wing also ‘toured’ Portland in a campaign to promote the need of gathering information and volunteers to manifest change at a legal level and protect the human rights of queer people. The Homophobic Violence Documentation Project collected raw data from survivors in order to leverage response from the city government and disprove the police narrative that the violence the PPD dismissed as ‘white on white’ violence was actually organized groups of neo-Nazis specifically targeting people–LGBTQ people—in an expression of intolerance and intimidation. As Mr. Nakagawa explained “Basically the group of people described as ‘white people victimized by hate crimes’ were actually queer, were being subjected to bigoted violence. It was part of a much broader effort to get this aggregated data because the Portland Police were trying to make the argument that there were no neo-Nazi skinheads in Portland. And that the most victimized group of people by race in terms of hate crimes were white people. And so we were eventually able to disprove that by demonstrating that there were a variety of different kinds of ways in which people of color being subjected to hate crimes were different—the character of the crime, the way the crimes were committed, the intensity of the violence—a bunch of different things.”

Hate Crime Policy started nationally in the U.S. in 1968 towards the end of the Civil Rights movement with the passing of the Civil Rights Act. The Civil Rights Act made it illegal to use, threaten, force or interfere with anyone based on race, color, religion, or national origin. These laws were expanded to include housing discrimination (1968), protections on the basis of familial status and disability (1988), The Church Arson Prevention Act (1996), and the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act (2009) which extended federal protections based on gender, disability, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

In Oregon, the Intimidation Statute wasn’t written into law until 1981 and was created in response to an increase in white supremacist gang activity. The statute focused on the number of persons involved in hate crimes instead of the harm. This element of the Intimidation Statute was rewritten

Some of the Coalition for Human Dignity members interviewed in this episode, clockwise from top left: Scot Nakagawa, Jonathan Mozzochi (1990), Steven Gardiner, Abby Layton (date unknown), Devin Burhgart, and Eric Ward.
in 2019’s Senate Bill 577, which also expanded on the 1989 Oregon hate crime law that ensured equality based on sexual orientation to include gender identity as a protected class. The Portland Bias Crime Unit of the Portland Police Bureau started in 1991 to track and investigate hate crimes in Portland.

Aryan Nations Lawsuit The Aryan Nations compound sat on 20 acres almost 3 miles from the small city of Hayden Lake (est. 2000 pop. 494). After Victoria Keenan—identified in news reports as “part white part American Indian”—and her son escaped from their near-lethal encounter with security guards at the compound, attorney Morris Dees from the Southern Poverty Law Center took on the case, in what would be his sixth consecutive legal victory bankrupting a hate group. Like in the Metzger trial (see Show Notes, episode Two) two of the three guards involved (one fled) faced criminal charges; the suit against Butler argued that his criminal negligence was responsible for the violence against Keenan and her daughter.

According to Mike Gudgell with ABC News, “The case closely paralleled a normal personal injury trial. Jurors found, in effect, that Butler had hired untrained ex-convicts as guards; given them no training or formal policies to follow; allowed them to carry assault weapons; filled their heads with hatred; and set them loose on the community. Like the department store that allows a known alcoholic to drive its delivery trucks — an alcoholic who one day runs into a crowd of children — Butler should have known that the actions of his security guards were a foreseeable result of his negligent and reckless supervision.” The trial created a tense atmosphere locally, with SWAT teams and rooftop sharpshooters. Keenan was awarded $6.3 million. In some reports she was the sole bidder at an auction for ownership of the compound and all its assets, which she purchased with money loaned to her by the SPLC—money that she would receive back as part of her settlement. In other reports she received the land as part of the suit. It’s confusing. What is clear is that Aryan Nations demagogue Richard Butler, then aged 82, filed for bankruptcy a month later. While he was displaced from his compound, Butler moved into a comfortable home in the area purchased on his behalf by wealthy anti-Semitic supporter Vincent Bertolini, financier to many hate groups.

Running Out Of Money An interesting rabbit hole on the CHD running out of money shortly after their move to Seattle, including anti-gay religious groups withdrawing support and details on the debt and the migration of the files.

The American Front, according to 2013 archives maintained by watchdog group the Anti-Defamation League, is a racist skinhead group that is active in several states around the country. The group espouses an anti-
Semitic, white supremacist ideology and disseminates its message in public events that demonize Jews, immigrants, and other minorities. Before the current leader took the helm of the group in 2002, American Front was unusual in that it espoused “Third Positionist” beliefs, a peculiar blend of right-wing extremism that rejects both capitalism and communism in favor of an ill-defined “third way.” Founded in 1987 by Bob Heick, it is one of the oldest racist skinhead groups in the U.S.

Lovejoy Surgicenter provided safe, legal abortions through 23 weeks of pregnancy from 1971 until January 16, 2021. In 1991 they won an $8.2 million civil lawsuit against protestors who congregated outside the Northwest Portland facility; in 1992 they were targeted by an arsonist. For more than 30 years they experienced almost continuous protest by anti-choice zealots. Portland filmmaker Vanessa Renwick interviewed a protestor in front of the clinic for their 1994 short film Worse. The clinic announced on its website that it would reopen March 1, 2021 under new management in a new location.

Heraclitus is most often attributed to have said the phrase that we can not step in the same river twice, which is quoted by Eric Ward. Little is know about the life of the philosopher; he was known to live around 500 BCE in Ephesus, which is near what is now Kuşadası, Turkey—a beach town on the west coast of the Aegean sea.

One of the existing fragments of the phrase is ‘potamoisi toisin autoisin embainousin hetera kai hetera hudata epirei;’ “On those stepping into rivers staying the same other and other waters flow.”