

Bloomington United Is Back

With hate crimes at their highest national level in years and mass shootings occurring with horrifying regularity, this anti-racism, pro-diversity organization has regrouped and is ready to respond to acts of prejudice and intolerance in our community.



Members of Bloomington United gather in front of the Monroe County Courthouse where the flag is flown at half-staff in honor of the 17 victims killed by a gunman at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. (l-r) David Hummons, Lynne Shiffriss, Xavier Chavez, Beverly Calender-Anderson, Doug Bauder, Rabbi Sue Silberberg, IUPD Chief Laury Flint, Carolyn Lipson Walker, Bob Arrove, and Darrell Stone.

By Carmen Siering • Photography by Rodney Margison

It is no secret that even as he announced his run for the presidency in June 2015, Donald Trump was presenting himself as a different kind of candidate. “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. . . . They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists,” he stated that day, establishing the tenor not only for his campaign but for the country.

In the month following Trump’s election in November 2016, the Southern Poverty Law Center reported more than 1,000 incidents of bias-related harassment and intimidation. Many in the country feel there has been a shift in the national demeanor—that those who may have quietly harbored negative sentiments toward minorities

now sense a tacit approval to voice and act upon those feelings. Bloomington has been spared violence, but there have been a number of instances of vandalism intended to intimidate.

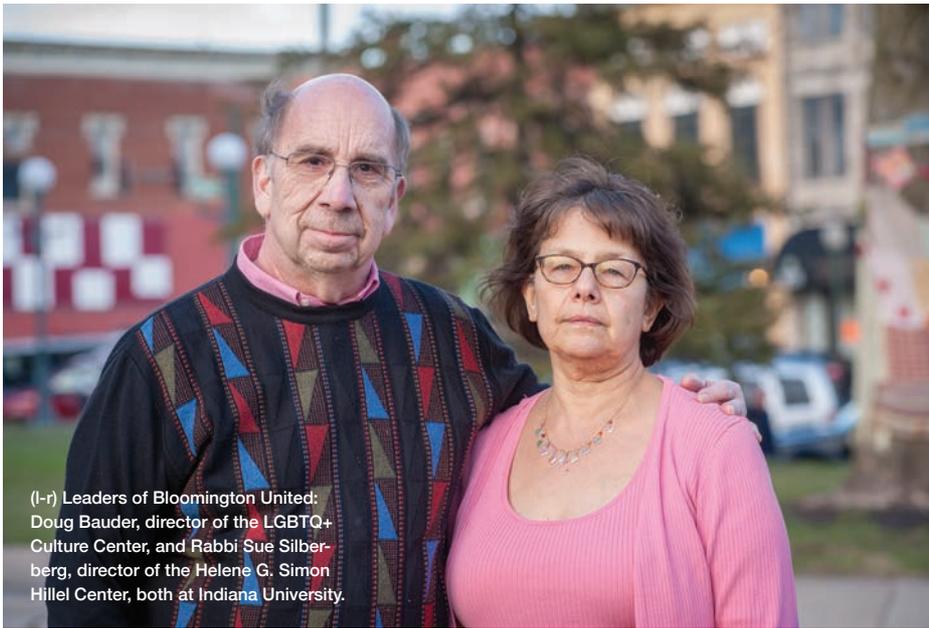
The Bloomington Human Rights Commission Hate Incidents Report for June 1, 2016, to December 31, 2017, noted several cases of hate-related vandalism since Trump’s election. In November 2016, someone spray-painted swastikas and the letters “KKK” on the B-Line Trail and on light poles. In February 2017, numerous flyers and posters from a white nationalist group were posted on the Indiana University campus. In October, racially offensive graffiti, including the letters “KKK” and images of swastikas,

were found at the East 10th Street underpass, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington, the intersection of College Mall Road and Sare Road, and the railway underpass at College and 14th Street. These were public offenses; other incidents aimed at individuals also occurred.

In light of the increase in hate, a group that formed in response to a local crisis in the 1990s has become active once again. Bloomington United is back.

The arrival of hate

Benjamin Smith, an Indiana University graduate student and a member of the white supremacist World Church of the Creator,



(l-r) Leaders of Bloomington United: Doug Bauder, director of the LGBTQ+ Culture Center, and Rabbi Sue Silberberg, director of the Helene G. Simon Hillel Center, both at Indiana University.



Barbara McKinney, director of the Bloomington Human Rights Commission. Photo by Martin Boling

arrived in Bloomington in May 1998 already well-versed in stirring up trouble. He had withdrawn from the University of Illinois in February, a week before a disciplinary hearing was scheduled to address a number of charges, among them complaints that he had posted racist literature in his dorm, peeked into dormitory windows, and unconfirmed reports that he was in possession of weapons.

Soon after he arrived in Bloomington, Smith began leaving White Nationalist Party leaflets under the wipers of cars on the IU campus. University officials met with him to discuss the matter. In response, Smith wrote a long letter to the *Indiana Daily Student* accusing the university of trying to curb his right to free speech.

According to *The New York Times*, that Fourth of July weekend in 1998, Smith placed 2,000 fliers on cars across the city. *The Times* notes that Smith began to give interviews, allowing an even wider audience access to his racist worldview.

As the summer wore on, it became clear the community needed to have a unified response to Smith's barrage of hateful rhetoric.

The formation of Bloomington United

"I really feel that the majority of people in this community, in this country, want to do the right thing," says Rabbi Sue Silberberg, executive director of the Helene G. Simon Hillel Center at IU. "They don't have messages of hate in their hearts. But they do feel powerless and alone. Unfortunately, those who have the message of hate are often louder. And they can be intimidating."

Doug Bauder, director of the LGBTQ+ Culture Center at Indiana University, recalls how Bloomington United got started. "The mayor [John Fernandez] called together members of the communities that were being disparaged," he says. "The black community, the gay community, and the Jewish community were all targeted, so we were all thrown together."

Silberberg says there was a reason Fernandez was interested in a response from a community group. "Smith was part of the World Church of the Creator," she explains. "When that group perceives there is no pushback, things can escalate quickly."

The first few meetings were small, brainstorming sessions. Inspired by the work of

Not In Our Town—an anti-hate, pro-unity group formed in Billings, Montana, in 1993—Bloomington United was born.

Barbara McKinney, director of the Bloomington Human Rights Commission, was part of that early collective of like-minded individuals. She says when people started finding fliers on their cars, they began calling her office.

"There is an ordinance about leaving unsolicited stuff on cars, so we wrote Benjamin Smith a letter and asked him to stop," she says. "Nothing came of it. But it was the first action we tried to take. He was still doing it, so we started trying to come up with a response."

That response was a show of strength—the group planned a unity rally for November.

Reports from the time say 500 people showed up in support of Bloomington United. The group had printed signs that could be seen in yards all over town. Many people had them at the rally. There was a counter demonstration, too—Benjamin Smith, alone, with a sign of his own.

"At the rally, he stood on the sidelines with a sign that said, 'No hate speech means no free speech,'" Bauder says.

Bloomington United members realized that, in light of the First Amendment, Smith was right. At that time the yard signs read, "No Hate Speech, No Hate Crimes, Not in our yards, Not in our town, Not ANYWHERE."

"We realized we had the right to exercise our right to no hate speech," Silberberg says. "But we changed the signs to read just 'no hate' instead of 'no hate speech.'"

After the rally, Smith continued distributing his white supremacist literature and kept writing letters to the editor. It seemed the people of Bloomington and Smith were at an impasse. As the school year ended, no one knew the worst was yet to come.

"A troubled young man"

Gwen Jones, an African American member of Bloomington United, was the only member of the group to talk directly to Smith.

"I remember my impetus for reaching out to him," she says. "I grew up in Alabama and I had never experienced in-your-face prejudice. So, knowing he was this radically racist person, I wanted to talk to him and see if he would say something to hurt me. I wanted to see what this would feel like. But I didn't get that at all. He just seemed like a very troubled young man. I felt like he needed help."

A Timeline of Hate in Bloomington

NOTE: Selected incidents from the Bloomington Human Rights Commission Hate Incident Reports.

June 1998—Several reports of racist flyers found on windshields. These notes are “apparently being distributed by the ‘propaganda minister for the White Nationalist Party.’” Later it is learned they are distributed by Benjamin Smith.

June 1998—A bomb threat, later cleared as a hoax, is called in to a local gay bar.

Autumn 1998—BLOOMINGTON UNITED IS FORMED

September 1998—The Tibetan Cultural Center sign is covered with a cloth sign that reads, “Jesus is the ONLY God.”

January 1999—A woman reports her Bloomington United sign was torn down and a large rock was thrown through her bedroom window.

January 1999—A man reports his and many of his neighbors’ Bloomington United signs have been shredded.

April 1999—A bust of Adolf Hitler is found on the lawn of the Hillel Center. The bust has a note attached that reads, “Happy Holocaust Day from the one who made it all possible—The Fuhrer.”

July 4, 1999—Won-Joon Yoon is shot and killed by Benjamin Smith outside the Korean United Methodist Church.

July 1999—An African American woman reports being stabbed in the stomach on the IU campus by a white man wearing a black mask and white T-shirt with a swastika. Other African American students report being verbally harassed by white men with shaved heads wearing swastikas on their arms. A student reports finding a flyer in a campus restroom recruiting membership in the KKK.

October 2000—A local Christian bookstore is vandalized with anti-religious graffiti.

October 2001—Old Paths Baptist Church demonstrates in Peoples Park with slogans and signs attacking gays, among others.

May 2002—Hate-oriented graffiti, including a swastika, is found on the Seventh Day Adventist Church, including an expletive directed at Jews.

July 2003—The sign at the Islamic Center of Bloomington is split in half by vandals.

April 2003—Numerous reports of swastikas and the word “Jew” being painted on a Jewish student’s car.

July 2005—A Molotov cocktail is thrown through the window of the Islamic Center of Bloomington.

November 2005—More than two dozen members of Old Paths Baptist Church protest outside The Inner Chef chanting anti-gay slogans, burning a gay pride flag, and carrying signs with messages like, “Fags Die, God Laughs.”

April 2006—More instances of racist, anti-Semitic, and homophobic graffiti are found around the city.

October 2006—A woman reports that while walking in downtown Bloomington wearing a headscarf, three white males approach her, yell anti-Muslim slurs, and say they would like to take her scarf and choke her with it.

October 2007—An African American woman reports finding a noose in a tree in her backyard.

November 2007—Vandalism at the Jewish Student Center/Chabad House includes a beer bottle thrown through an upstairs window. A few weeks later, someone removes the letters spelling the word “Jewish” on the building.

December 2009—A local church reports a break-in where money is taken from the safe, and pentagrams, “heil Satan,” euro signs, dollar signs, and upside-down crosses are spray-painted on the walls.

January 2010—Racial slurs and swastikas are painted on government buildings.

November 2010—Several incidents are reported against the Jewish community, including rocks thrown through the windows at Chabad House and the Hillel Center. Hebrew texts are taken from the Wells Library research collection; they are later found urinated on in the men’s restroom. Similar texts are found in the toilets of the Monroe County Public Library.



White supremacist Thomas Buhls (left) argues with a counterprotester at a Traditionalist Youth Network protest outside Boxcar Books in August 2013. Photo by Ben Mikesell, Indiana Daily Student

August 2013—Four members of the Traditionalist Youth Network at IU, a chapter of a national white supremacist group, picket Boxcar Books on East 6th Street, chanting “Racist, fascist, anti-gay, Trad Youth will not go away.” Met by approximately 80 counter-protestors, the four are sprayed with a garden hose and pelted with apples. After 30 minutes, they leave.

October 2015—A white IU student assaults a Muslim woman outside a local restaurant, grabbing her by the neck, pushing her down, and pulling on her headscarf while yelling racial and anti-police slurs.

November 2016—Swastikas and the letters “KKK” are painted on light poles and along the B-Line Trail.

October 2017—Several incidences of racially offensive graffiti, including the letters “KKK” and images of swastikas, are found at the East 10th Street underpass, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington, the intersection of College Mall Road and Sare Road, and the railway underpass at College and 14th Street.

(below) Shin-Ho Yoon (right), father of slain IU student Won-Joon Yoon, carries his son's ashes from the unity service. Photo courtesy of IU Archives (right) The *Indiana Daily Student* captured the July 4th weekend tragedy that rocked Bloomington. Image courtesy of IU Archives



By the summer of 1999, that became clear. A year after he swept into Bloomington and began papering the city with white supremacist tracts, Benjamin Smith went on a drive-by shooting spree that began on July 2 in Chicago and ended on July 4 in Bloomington. He picked his victims at random, targeting the Jewish, Asian, and black communities.

Two men died. Former Northwestern University basketball coach Ricky Byrdsong, an African American, was killed in Skokie, Illinois, on July 2, while walking with two of his three young children. On July 4, Smith shot Won-Joon Yoon four times as he walked to worship services at the Korean United Methodist Church on East 3rd Street. The Korean graduate student had recently arrived in Bloomington to begin doctoral studies in computer science at IU.

The shooting spree rocked the community. McKinney recalls being told by Mayor Fernandez about Yoon's murder, and the fact that Smith was still at large, as the city's annual Fourth of July parade was about to start. Bloomington United was part of the parade.

"I remember we were there with our white T-shirts that said 'Stop Hate' on the front and 'BU' on the back," McKinney says. "Mayor Fernandez said we could go home or the police could march with us. So we stayed and the police marched with us. My son was with me—he was 7. I'm still not sure if that was the right choice. It was kind of inspiring and kind of scary at the same time."

With sharpshooters on the roofs of the buildings downtown and surrounded by police in bulletproof vests, the group took a stand, but it was a tough choice.

CAMPUSCALENDAR

FACULTY AND GUEST CHAMBER RECITAL
The Fine Arts Quartet will be in concert at 8 p.m. Thursday at Auer Hall. Tickets are \$10 general admission and \$6 for students.

THURSDAY
JULY 8, 1999

INDIANA DAILY STUDENT

TODAY'S WEATHER

90 Sunny and very warm

63

FRIDAY 92 68 Partly cloudy

SATURDAY 84 70 Mostly 1-5pm

SUNDAY 81 61 Partly cloudy

Shooting spree ends with Smith's suicide

Ashley Shelby and Sean C. Bartel
Indiana Daily Student

Former IU student Benjamin Nathaniel "August" Smith is believed to be the gunman responsible for a deadly string of Midwest shootings during the week-end which took two lives, including an IU student, and left nine people injured.

Smith, listed in IU's computer as a junior criminal justice major, killed himself in Salem, Ill., late Sunday night. Police pursued him. Smith was well-known on the IU campus and in Bloomington for his vocal support of the white separatist movement.

Bloomington police have charged Smith with the shooting death of 26-year-old Won-Joon Yoon.

Police believe the spree began Friday in West Rogers Park, Ill., where the gunman wounded six Orthodox Jews on their way home from services.

The gunman then reportedly drove to Skokie, Ill., where he shot and killed former Northwestern basketball coach Ricky Byrdsong, an African American,

as he walked with his two children. Later that evening, shots were fired at two Asian Americans in nearby Northbrook. They were not hurt.

On Saturday, the spree extended to Springfield, Ill., where one African-American man was injured by gunfire and two more were fired upon but not hit.

Four hours later, in Decatur, Ill., an African-American minister was shot twice, once in the shoulder and once in the hip, where the bullet still remains.

Spree
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Victim had bright future

Ashley Shelby
Indiana Daily Student

Won-Joon Yoon was "promising." That is the word his family and friends use most when they describe the young man.

He was interested in philosophy. But his interest in aviation was instilled and his knowledge in-flight was a result of a unique blend of aviation and economics.

It was that interest that led to his enrollment in IU's Department of Economics enough to admit him into its exclusive Ph.D program. Each fall, the department admits about 25 students, and Yoon was one of them.

"The program is pretty exclusive by name," economics department head and professor Robert Ricker said. "The student interest in the airline industry and an unusual background to study it. That's the thing that stuck with me."

The 26-year-old Yoon was walking into services at the Korean United Methodist Church, 1924 E. Third St. Sunday when he was struck in the back by two bullets.

Future
Continued on page 13

'Gone are the dreams, hopes and happiness'

Ashley Shelby
Indiana Daily Student

Before stepping up to the podium in front of the Korean United Methodist Church Tuesday, Shin Ho Yoon sat in a folding chair and cried.

His only son, Won-Joon, was killed Sunday while walking into services at the church by suspected shooting spree killer Benjamin "August" Smith.

Yoon's family held a press conference to express its condolences for all the victims in last weekend's spree and to thank the Bloomington community for its support.

But as he stood before the media, Shin Ho Yoon made it clear exactly what his family had lost when his son was killed.

"With his death, gone are the dreams, hopes and happiness my family has had with my son, Won-Joon," he said.

"He was panned down by one missile, full of racial hatred, young American minister was shot twice, once in the shoulder and once in the hip, where the bullet still remains."

Family
Continued on page 13

Community rallies to help victims

Sean C. Bartel
Indiana Daily Student

Last weekend's shooting spree that claimed the life of IU student Won-Joon Yoon and former Northwestern men's basketball coach Ricky Byrdsong nearly overwhelmed the Bloomington community. Towns residents responded by filling the lawn of Yoon's church with a sea of flowers and have organized many activities to show support.

Eric Weddie
Indiana Daily Student

Benjamin "August" Smith's shooting spree this past weekend has brought numerous white racist and separatist groups into the mainstream media. The most notable is the World Church of the Creator, a group based in East Point, Ill., that Smith was a member of until May 1999.

Rev. Matt Hale, the current leader of the WCOTC, has appeared on CNN and in the New York Times this week. This recent attention has many regional and national anti-racism groups — such as the Anti-Defamation League — speaking out against the WCOTC. The ADL referred to the WCOTC as a "violent hate group," in a press release Wednesday, though racist group leaders believe the opposition will not adversely affect their groups.

When asked if the media would negatively affect the church, WCOTC press secretary Kelly O'Reilly replied, "No, I don't" in an on-line interview.

"I actually think while it is tragic what happened, this has drawn major publicity to the issues we talk about, and will be the only help we spread the word more effectively," O'Reilly said. "In all honesty, I wish the shooting would have never happened, it was a senseless loss, but it

Smith's troubled history at IU

Jeff Fleischer
Indiana Daily Student

While Benjamin "August" Smith became a national name with last week's shooting, he had already caused considerable debate on the IU and University of Illinois campuses.

Smith first became known to Bloomington authorities in May 1998, when two students contacted the IU Police Department to report racist fliers from the White Nationalist Party placed on cars parked near the Kelley School of Business. Within a week, two other fliers and a sticker were found in the Main Library.

One flier argued that whites need their own country and "protection from the abuses of blacks." Another read "The Voice of White America has been silenced. It is obvious to all racially-conscious people that whites want to stop the flow of non-white immigrants into this country." Other fliers criticized gays, Jews, Asians and interracial marriage. They all had contact information for people wanting to join the organization.

Pam Freeman, assistant dean of students and co-chair of the Racial Incidents Team, placed an advertisement in the *IDS* asking students to report any other fliers found.

"What we're concerned about is if it's encouraging hate among specific groups — we

History
Continued on page 13

WCOTC, KKK members not bothered by negative reactions

Eric Weddie
Indiana Daily Student

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MONDAY

The Bloomington Free Commission met Wednesday, July 7, at the Monroe County Public Library auditorium. The commission and the city government have been at odds ever since the April fire at Kangleberry Manor where local disc jockey Randy Lloyd died. Read about the meeting's outcome in Monday's paper.

IDS INFORMATION

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"No one really knew what was going on," Bauder says. "The whole thing was bizarre. It was just surreal."

Silberberg says not knowing where Smith was added tremendous uncertainty to the situation. "We knew he was out there," Silberberg says. "But we didn't know where he was or where he was going."

What they later found out was that Smith had left Bloomington following

the murder of Yoon. His spree of violence ended in rural southern Illinois later that day when, following a police chase, he shot himself in the chin and the chest. He died in the hospital.

"A service of unity"

In Bloomington, people united in their grief. Melanie Castillo-Cullather, director of the



Asian Culture Center, had been in her position just six months when Won-Joon Yoon was killed. She worked with university officials to help the slain student's family arrange their trip to Bloomington.

"I remember the university contacted the State Department because, at that time, something like this was very rare, and Attorney General Janet Reno came," Castillo-Cullather says. "Nowadays, because of all the killings in the schools, it has become somewhat normalized. But back then, it wasn't something you heard of in the news."

Reno was among several speakers—including university officials, representatives of the Korean community, and state and city dignitaries—at "A Community Gathering to Heal and Unite," sponsored by Bloomington United.

The service was held at the Indiana University Musical Arts Center. *Worldwide Faith News*, reporting on the gathering, wrote, "The auditorium was filled to capacity, and the multi-ethnic crowd also packed the lobby and overflowed to the outside of the auditorium building."

Beverly Calender-Anderson, director of the City of Bloomington Family and Community Resources Department and one of Bloomington United's founders, says that nearly 20 years later, that day is still one of her most vivid memories. "Not because of how many people were there, but because we were all of one mind," she says. "It wasn't a memorial service. It wasn't meant to be. It was a service of unity."

Giving people hope

It's been 20 years since Benjamin Smith came to Bloomington and began papering the city with his message of hate and intolerance. Twenty years since the formation of Bloomington United. In the intervening years, Bloomington has not had a hate crime as violent as the murder of Won-Joon Yoon.

Bloomington United never disbanded. When violence or vandalism against minorities occurred, the group rallied its forces, bringing the community together in shows of strength and solidarity. It has always stood ready to remind anyone who might forget that there is no place for hate in this town.

But in January, Bloomington United held a press conference in City Hall announcing its renewed effort to fight hate and prejudice. In support, Bloomington Mayor John Hamilton said, "Bloomington United is needed today, and that's regrettable, but thank goodness it is here."

The evidence that hate is on the rise nationally is clear. A new report from the Anti-Defamation League counted 1,986 anti-Semitic incidents in 2017—a 57 percent increase over the previous year, and the second-highest number since the prominent civil rights group began tracking such incidents nearly 40 years ago. According to the report, this figure represents the largest annual jump ever recorded.

The Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August was a gathering of white supremacists, white nationalists, neo-Nazis, Klansmen, and other racist and anti-Semitic groups. They carried Confed-



erate battle flags, and banners with swastikas and anti-Muslim slogans; many were armed. Their stated goal was to oppose the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee from the city's Emancipation Park. In reality, it was, as one organizer admitted, intended to unify the white nationalist movement in the United States. The rally ended in violent clashes between those attending the event and those opposing them. Civil rights activist Heather Heyer was killed when a car rammed into a group protesting the rally.

This turning tide is the reason Bloomington United feels the need to have a more visible presence in the community.

"Twenty years ago, we didn't have things like Charlottesville or Ferguson or Parkland," Calender-Anderson says. "With all of the things that are happening around the country, people feel helpless. Maybe hopeless. Bloomington United gives them some hope. They may not be able to stop what happened there, but they can get a yard sign, they can go to a study circle, they can attend a rally."

Preventive medicine

Bauder and Silberberg have been with the group since its formation in 1998 and serve as co-chairs now. Bauder says the new Bloomington United is busy getting yard signs out, putting response teams together, and preparing for the day when they might need to activate members.

"We think of this as preventive medicine," Bauder says. "We may never know if the signs make a difference. But if it's preventive medicine? I'm happy to provide that."



Bloomington United yard signs are available in the lobby of City Hall or at the Helene G. Simon Hillel Center, 730 E. 3rd St. When the current supply is depleted, you may order a yard sign by calling 812-336-3824. Leave your name, phone number, and email address. You will be contacted when more signs are printed. A \$5 donation is suggested.

(l-r) David Hummons, Lynne Shiffriss, Xavier Chavez, Beverly Calender-Anderson, Doug Bauder, Rabbi Sue Silberberg, IUPD Chief Laury Flint, Carolyn Lipson Walker, Bob Arrove, and Darrell Stone with the new Bloomington United reversible signs.

The group is seen that way by Bloomington Police Chief Mike Diekhoff, too. “We look at this group as an insurance policy to stop something, to keep something bad from happening,” he says. “A lot of what we do at the police department with outreach and crime prevention is to prevent something before it happens. Bloomington is special because of that kind of higher awareness, and maybe because of that we have fewer incidences of hate crimes. I would give credit to the organizations here, like Bloomington United, that are educating people and doing these kinds of prevention efforts.”

In the event that a hate group comes to town, Bloomington United is prepared to work in tandem with local law enforcement. Taking their cues from groups across the country and from national organizations like the Southern Poverty Law Center, if a group would come to Bloomington to march or hold a rally, Bloomington United’s response would be to hold an alternative event at a different location.

“We encourage anyone who wants to protest a hate group to do it somewhere else,” Diekhoff says. “From a law enforcement standpoint, we want to avoid the mixing of the two groups. Bloomington United has been good about hosting in a different location as an alternative to going to the hate event.”

Every Minute Counts

A non-confrontational program that worked well in the past—Every Minute Counts—is one Bloomington United plans to revive if a hate group comes to town. Bauder explains

how it worked with Old Paths Baptist Church, a group that would come to town carrying placards and shouting slogans such as “AIDS cures fags.”

“We were determined that if Old Paths Baptist Church came back to Peoples Park, we were going to encourage local people to avoid them,” Bauder says. “Instead, we would ask Bloomingtonians to walk over to Trinity Episcopal Church where they could pick up a ‘Bloomington United in Diversity’ pin and make a [financial] pledge to support organizations or identity groups being disparaged for every minute Old Paths was in town.”

When the group returned, Bloomington United put the plan into action, asking Bloomington residents to make a donation to diversity causes for every minute Old Paths stayed here. Bauder says several hundred dollars were raised. They let Old Paths know of the fundraising effort. “And, for a time at least, that was the last we saw of them,” Bauder says.

Then and now

Over the past few years, harassment, vandalism, threats, and other acts of violence directed at minority communities have increased in the United States. While Bloomington has been spared the worst of it, the city does have a record of such occurrences.

That is the reason Bloomington United has made a very public comeback.

Some members fear history repeating itself and see discouraging parallels to that summer when Benjamin Smith was spreading his message of white supremacy across the city.

“I would like to think things have changed for the better, but we’re back where we were 20 years ago,” says Melanie Castillo-Cullather of the Asian Culture Center. “What’s happening now is what was happening then. But if we can help it, we’re not going to get stuck in this situation. Seeing these high school students so woke? I’m hopeful they will bring us out of where we are and we will see a future that is much more promising than today. It’s their world we are preparing for.”

Bloomington United was formed in an effort to create a more promising world. With the help of supportive community members and local government, the group is continuing its efforts into the future. Gwen Jones, the African American woman who reached out to white supremacist Benjamin Smith 20 years ago, says that, for her, those efforts have made Bloomington feel like a safe place to live.

“I think Bloomington United has been an awesome part of keeping radicalism at bay,” Jones says. “I applaud Doug [Bauder] and Sue [Silberberg] and Beverly [Calender-Anderson] and all of the people who came together for the idea of ‘not in my town.’ It was fantastic. I think it’s because of that and because of all of the city officials who got involved and have been sincere about protecting our community. With all of the students who come here and for the minorities who live here, we just can’t afford to have people afraid to live here. And, you know, I just never think about it.”

For more information, visit Bloomington United on Facebook. ✨