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IDAHO GROUP STANDING FIRM AGAINST NEO-NAZIS

[THIRD Edition]

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COEUR D'ALENE, Idaho -- When Rev. William (Father Bill) Wassmuth was asked to head a local citizens' group contending with neo-Nazis who set up a compound just outside town, the outgoing chairman joked, "You don't have a wife and a kid and your church is made of brick."

The remark turned prophetic on Sept. 15, when Wassmuth's wood-frame house was pipe-bombed, allegedly by four neo-Nazis. A back door was blown off, several windows were shattered and shrapnel sprayed the neighborhood. Wassmuth, who was not hurt, said last week, "The joke isn't very funny now."

More than ever, the citizens' group headed by Wassmuth -- the Kootenai County Task Force on Human Relations -- is aware of its perilous mission in this northern Idaho tourist and timber town of 20,000. Many members say they are on a neo-Nazi "hit list" uncovered by the FBI. The list was discovered during the arrest of three men and a woman for the bombing of Wassmuth's house, and for the subsequent bombings Sept. 29 of three government buildings.

"These people are absolutely wacko," said Marvin Mend, a real estate broker and task force member. "I was going to carry a gun. But then a friend pointed out that a gun won't help because these people will sneak up and shoot you in the back."

Wassmuth's insistence that the task force be nonviolent is another reason not to carry a gun, Mend added.

The four persons charged in the bombings are tied to the white supremacist Jesus Christ Christian Church, commonly known as Aryan Nations, with headquarters in a forest compound 12 miles north of Coeur d'Alene. The 30-35 Aryans, as they are known to local citizenry, advocate the creation of a separate white Christian nation out of five northwestern states and teach that Jews are the offspring of Satan.

In the early 1980s the Aryans spawned a violent revolutionary sect known as The Order -- whose members now are either imprisoned or dead -- which engaged in counterfeiting, armed robbery and murder. The four persons charged in the recent bombings are alleged to have formed a second Order.

The task force, formed in 1981 after children of a racially mixed marriage were harassed by a white supremacist, stands as a nonviolent countervailing force to the Aryans. Its 175 members -- professionals, merchants, teachers, law enforcement officials, laborers and housewives -- provide moral and legal support to the county's scant minority population, conduct informational and educational programs, and try to present a balanced picture of northern Idaho to the rest of the country.

But its nonviolent ethic is being tested. Most residents anticipate further attacks by the Aryans, even though the Aryans rarely are seen in town.

"They recruit thugs," said Ray Givens, husband of state Rep. Jeanne Givens. "What can you expect but thuggery?"

Said Clyde Bentley, city editor of the Coeur d'Alene Press: "This is the nation's finest elk hunting county. The big-bore rifles in most houses here could blow a man across the street."

One task force member being interviewed asked that he not be identified as a Jew. "Why hang my name out there as a target?" he said. His daughter has received a phone threat because he is Jewish, he said.

The Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, which monitors extremist activity, considers the task force unusual in that it has sustained itself for several years, while most such groups form to deal with a specific incident and disband.

"The task force is a model for this type of activism," said Marvin Stern of the league's Seattle office. "If the Aryan Nations would pack up and go away so would the task force."

Task force members, and most residents, wish fervently for the Aryans to leave. Nobody knows why the Aryans, led by Rev. William Butler, came 10 years ago.

It is supposed that Butler, who was unavailable for comment, and his following were attracted by the small number of minorities -- less than 1 percent of the county's 65,000 residents -- and by the natural beauty. Lake Coeur d'Alene, with 100 miles of pine-guarded shoreline, is a popular outdoor recreation area. "They feel they have a right to the best land in the country, which is right here," said Wassmuth.

Unfortunately, as reports of the Aryans began to circulate nationally, residents felt themselves being branded as bigots. "The perception is that there must be a reason Aryan Nations is up there," said Stern, "when it is an accident."

In a town with a new \$60 million lakefront resort hotel trying to promote tourism the Aryans are about as welcome as a plague of locusts.

"It's a public relations tragedy," said Gov. John Evans, Democratic challenger for the Senate seat held by Steven Symms. "We've worked hard to build recreation in that area . . . people have a vision there's a great number of Aryans but it's only a small pocket of people."

The task force is determined to correct any misconceptions about where the town's sympathies lay. Last summer, when the Aryans held a congress of about 300 right-wing extremists, and attracted national media, the task force held its own rally in town, a celebration of ethnic diversity, attended by more than 600 persons including Gov. Evans. The Aryans were angered when the task force rally diverted media attention, according to Bentley.

After the bombings in September, the task force organized a candlelight procession. Last spring, it brought in speakers such as Julian Bond and Ada Deer to North Idaho College, which counts about 30 blacks among its 1,200 students. A year ago, the town's schools recognized Martin Luther King Day as a holiday at the urging of the task force.

Perhaps its major accomplishment was the state's enactment of the 1983 Malicious Harassment Act. The first prosecution under the act, which is coming up, stems from a shopping center incident last summer in which a black resident allegedly was harassed by a white man with ties to the Aryans. The task force is lobbying for an antidomestic terrorism bill that would prohibit paramilitary training by the Aryans and an estimated 270 neo-Nazis elsewhere in the state.

At the heart of the task force is Wassmuth, a bushy-haired, 45-year-old Catholic priest who belongs to the Kiwanis and who invites the town's 15-20 Jewish residents to hold their services at St. Pius Church.

"I'm doing this as a member of the community," said Wassmuth. "I try to keep it distinct from my role as priest. I don't want this seen as an issue of church vs. church. The issue is one of social justice."

Residents describe Wassmuth as "caring and compassionate" and marvel at his sense of humor in the face of Aryan threats. The day before his house was bombed, Wassmuth heard that the Aryans were spreading rumors that he was a rabbi disguised as a priest, according to Mend.

"I saw him the day after the bombing," said Mend. "He said, 'I've been a Jew for two days and already I don't like it.' "

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