



Turning hate into Opportunity for Community Building *A case study from Not in Our Town*

What can a community do when a hate group comes to town and targets a wide variety of organizations, each of which have different ideas of how to respond – or not?

That's what happened in Charleston and Wheeling, West Virginia in March 2010. The Westboro Baptist Church hate group announced it would picket Jewish and Catholic institutions, a local university, and, as a last-minute addition designed for maximum emotional anguish, the Montcoal Mine, where a dozen miners had just lost their lives.

How could the community respond, particularly when some people preferred to keep a low profile, while others wanted to stage a loud counter-protest? Who could even lead such a community response, given the different values of the targeted groups?

A coalition of local leaders convened at Temple Israel, one of the targeted institutions, and decided they had to present a united front. The message had to be broad enough to include everyone, but specific enough to show opposition to the hatred espoused by Westboro.

The group turned to the NIOT tool box for ideas.

First, be inclusive: All the targeted institutions had to be at the planning meeting, because all were part of the conversation.

Second, focus on the positive: Whatever responses were planned had to proclaim positive messages of love and acceptance, rather than lash out at the hate group.

Third, make the action as broad-based as possible, incorporating all constituencies from law enforcement to youth, and all ages and cultures.

The approach was multi-pronged:

1. a full-page ad in the local newspaper proclaiming West Virginia's commitment to love and acceptance
2. a unity pledge for community members to sign
3. signs for people's front lawns, provided by the West Virginia State Chamber of Commerce
4. a dancing flash mob that deflected attention from Westboro's message of hate
5. a "stop the hate" rally on the steps of the Capitol building

The ad campaign was spearheaded by Rabbi Cohn of Temple Israel, one of the targeted institutions. While brainstorming one evening with his wife, he remembered Billings, Montana, the subject of the first Not In Our Town film, where thousands of residents put paper menorahs in their windows to demonstrate unity with one Jewish family targeted by bigots. The Cohns came up with the idea of a big pink heart, to demonstrate West Virginians' capacity for love.

That heart was at the center of the ad campaign that ran in the Charleston Gazette and Local Mail at a discounted rate, highlighting the importance of bringing local media on board. The ad asked locals to sign a unity pledge based on a similar pledge created by students at Stanford University in Palo Alto, CA that coalition members had seen on NIOT.org.

The state Chamber of Commerce ordered more than 600 lawn signs, which residents were encouraged to pick up and display in their front yards.

As preparations continued, challenges were turned into opportunities. A group of LGBT students at Marshall University in nearby Huntington "were very angry," says Amy Weintraub, director of Covenant House, another targeted institution. They wanted to stage a loud

protest against Westboro. "We needed to channel that energy in a positive way," she says.

The solution? A dancing flash mob that appeared several blocks away from the Westboro pickets, drowning out its message of hate with a spirited disco rendition of John Denver's paeon to West Virginia, "Country Road."

As a less energetic alternate, a "stop the hate" rally was held on the Capitol steps, again demonstrating the city's solidarity with all its residents.

"People were excited to be part of something positive," says Rabbi Cohn.

The coalition that came together to stand up to Westboro's hatred became the spark of something new that coalition members want to keep alive. A follow-up

meeting the next week focused on building a quick-response network to help the community face similar future crises.

"We are not just looking backward, we are looking forward," says Paul Sheridan. "This had the potential to be so unbelievably explosive. But it gave us an incredible opportunity for cultivating new partnerships."

"The mayor's office, the university, mainline churches, organized labor, every non-profit -- people wanted to get in," says coalition member Deb Weinstein. "This is how we do things in West Virginia."

Contributing to this report were Nell Fleming, Paul Sheridan, Rabbi Jim Cohn, Debbie Weinstein and Amy Weintraub. Adapted from www.niot.org.