

Ex-skinhead speaks out against hate groups

By **MARK LANE**, Staff writer

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Leyden

DELAND -- T.J. Leyden is a speaker of the "scared straight" school: fast, loud, sometimes profane.

The former neo-Nazi paced the room telling of his journey from volatile skinhead to an anti-racism activist and consultant for the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

Speaking Monday to Stetson University students, the author of the book "Skinhead Confessions" opened a window on the violent subculture that was once his passion. He warned its numbers are growing and its recruiting is more sophisticated and pervasive than most would suspect.

And Florida is one of the places where those numbers are troubling. By Leyden's calculations, Florida is the No. 3 state for hate groups with 56 active groups.

The Southern Poverty Law Center uses a different methodology to define active hate groups, but it, too, puts the state third behind California and Texas.

The group's 2011 report lists 49 racial hate groups in Florida, including five in Jacksonville and four in Orlando

Ramee Indralingam, chairman of Stetson's chemistry department, arranged for the talk after becoming concerned about incidents involving intolerance last year.

"I was looking for somebody who would speak against any kind of hate crime," she said and was impressed with what listeners said about Leyden's talks.

A compact man in his 40s with close-cropped hair, a goatee and designer-style glasses, Leyden is no longer the frightening figure he was in the 1990s, although he still has the purposeful stride of the U.S. Marine he once was.

He usually wears long-sleeved shirts and his 3-inch SS lightning-bolt neck tattoo is gone through laser removal. His three tattoos of swastikas and large crossed hammers of the skinhead groups called "Hammerskins" are visible only in his PowerPoint slides.

Leyden was drawn to the skinhead scene of Southern California in the 1980s. He came for the punk rock music and stayed for the gang violence.

As he got older, he served jail time but avoided felony convictions and studied the ideology of white separatism.

"Separatism is the politically correct term for racism," he observed, noting that hate groups come in all colors.

And he continued recruiting for white hate groups while in the Marines until 1990.

"I was not discharged for being a racist. I was discharged for drinking my weight in alcohol."

When he got out, he married a woman who shared his ideology -- a chilling photo in his presentation is a snapshot of her, obviously pregnant, wearing a T-shirt saying "Aryan baby" -- and he went to work recruiting for the cause. He said he often targeted middle school students because of their impressionability.

Only when he pondered the kind of future his own boys would face within the movement did he begin an 18-month journey away from his former life -- a journey that culminated when his mother suggested he go to the Simon Wiesenthal Center and share what he knew about neo-Nazi organizations.

He said the visit turned into a two-and-half week debriefing. The debriefing turned into a new life as a lecturer and consultant to law enforcement, schools and the military.

"It's kind of a penance to do this," he said.

Leyden is slated to speak in June at the Summit Against Violent Extremism in Dublin sponsored by Google Ideas and Council on Foreign Relations.

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