

# Communities aim to discourage extremism

Some say president has emboldened hate groups

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Ethan Eley might be barely old enough to drive, but the Cincinnati-area youth knows what he doesn't like.

"I really don't appreciate Nazis," he said. "I hate them."

Some of Eley's family members disappeared during the Holocaust in Germany, he said. So when the 16-year-old former Boy Scout drove through suburban Lincoln Heights earlier this month and spotted a band of masked demonstrators wielding swastika-embazoned banners over Interstate 75, he felt compelled to pull off the highway and do something.

He wasn't the only one. Eley and other local residents slipped past the police officers trying to quell tensions and grabbed a flag from the fleeing demonstrators, stomping on it and ultimately setting it aflame.

"There was just a general sense of unity for pushing people like that out of their community," Eley told the Cincinnati Enquirer, part of the USA TODAY Network.

Lincoln Heights was the first all-Black, self-governing city in the North, according to the Cincinnati Preservation Association, and at one time was the nation's largest predominantly Black city.

Some say community vigilance and nonviolent intervention may become more crucial given what they see as a rise in hateful rhetoric emboldened by the reelection of President Donald Trump, whose executive actions have in part targeted diversity efforts and some of the nation's most marginalized groups, including immigrants and the transgender community.

Jon Lewis, a research fellow at George Washington University's Program on Extremism, said that was the impetus for incidents such as a neo-Nazi march that took place in November in Ohio's state capital, Columbus.

"This absolutely speaks to the emboldening of the sense of entitlement



**Hundreds rally against hate along Route 1 in Kittery, Maine, in July 2022, a week after a neo-Nazi group marched in the same area.** DEB CRAM/PORTSMOUTH HERALD

and the sense of freedom that I think a lot of white supremacists and neo-Nazis feel at this current moment," Lewis said. "They think that they can, you know, intimidate, harass, and engage in this hateful conduct without any real repercussions."

After the demonstration near Cincinnati, the local NAACP issued a statement suggesting the Trump administration was partly to blame.

"It is well known that people receive messages and actions in different manners," the group said. "The current executive orders and actions have angered many and emboldened others."

Trump signed orders last month aimed at eliminating federal diversity efforts, increasing immigration enforcement, and limiting the rights or recognition of transgender and nonbinary individuals. The president also commuted, pardoned or dismissed cases of 1,500 people charged in the insurrection of Jan. 6, 2021, at the U.S. Capitol, which some critics also feared might embolden far-right extremist groups.

Meanwhile, white supremacist rhetoric and activities have been on the rise since last summer, particularly among groups designated as hate groups by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

In Nashville, Tennessee, city officials passed ordinances aimed at muffling extremist activity after more frequent

demonstrations by such groups, including an instance in July when demonstrators rushed the council chambers, forcing closure of the gallery.

Lewis, of George Washington University, said such events are typically organized through encrypted messaging services by small groups more interested in provoking small conflicts rather than large-scale street fights or violent terrorism.

Other community leaders have struggled with how to handle such displays while allowing free speech. Cincinnati lawyer H. Louis Sirkin said the demonstrators in Lincoln Heights were likely protected by the First Amendment. Symbols such as swastikas and burning crosses aren't protected if their purpose is to intimidate.

Hamilton County Sheriff Charmaine McGuffey was among those saying the group had not violated any laws.

"The protest was occurring on sidewalks designed for pedestrian travel," according to a news release issued by police in nearby Evendale, Ohio. "The protest, while very offensive, was not unlawful. The protest was short lived in duration. The protesters left the area on their own."

Eighty miles northeast, the city of Springfield, Ohio, filed a federal lawsuit against a neo-Nazi group known as the Blood Tribe.

The suit charges that group members harassed residents who had stood up for the city's Haitian immigrants, who had endured racial slurs and false rumors. Trump had seized upon the falsehoods during his 2024 campaign, claiming Haitians were "eating the pets" in their neighborhoods.

According to the suit, the Blood Tribe's campaign utilized email, social media and physical intimidation in efforts to silence private citizens and elected leaders. It says the group exceeded the bounds of protected speech, violating the civil rights of those targeted.

"The City of Springfield will not stand idly by while hate groups like Blood Tribe attempt to terrorize our residents and violate their civil rights," Springfield Mayor Rob Rue said in a statement. "This lawsuit sends a clear message that hate, intimidation, and violence have no place in our community."

That was the message sent by those who confronted neo-Nazi demonstrators in Lincoln Heights. In Columbus, Black community leaders and citizens gathered in November to walk the route taken by extremists the day before.

Such community resistance efforts, some say, are necessary.

"I thought it was such a powerful reaction to actually have a proactive march in response," said Maria Bruno, executive director of Ohioans Against Extremism. "I think we now understand more clearly that this is more of a pattern of behavior and that it requires an organized, actual response."

Eley's father said his son has strong convictions about right and wrong and may have drawn on his Boy Scout background with its oath to help others as he drove through Lincoln Heights that day.

"It was purely a coincidence that he was on the interstate and saw the flags and made the choice to take a stand against such blatant racism," Bryan Eley said. "Despite the potential dangers, rather than ignore, he chose to get involved and help."

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