

It's a sad truth that Bloomington was ahead of its time when it came to forming a community response to hate crimes.

Bloomington United was established in 1998 after racist and anti-Semitic leaflets were distributed in Bloomington over the weekend of July 4, 1998. One of the organizers, a guy who called himself Ben, phoned a talk show featuring then-Mayor John **Fernandez** on WFIU to defend the leafleting and essentially question the need for a community response at all.

Ben, it turned out, was Benjamin Smith, who had been an IU student and was a Bloomington resident. A year after he was involved in the leafleting that prompted the formation of **Bloomington United**, Smith went on a shooting spree that targeted people because of ethnicity. He started in the Chicagoland area when he shot and wounded Jewish people in Skokie, Illinois, and then killed former Northwestern University basketball coach Ricky Byrdsong, a black man apparently picked at random as he jogged with his children. He drove to Bloomington and shot and killed Korean IU graduate student Won-Joon Yoon as he was entering the Korean United Methodist Church on East Third Street.

Smith was a follower of hate group World Church of the Creator and its leader, Matthew Hale, who is now in prison. Smith went on the run, but was cornered by police later that night of July 4 and killed himself.

The civic and religious leaders who had formed **Bloomington United** developed a loyal and engaged following. The group increased its visibility through rallies, public statements, yard signs and educational forums that promoted widespread agreement in that Bloomington was and is a welcoming community in which racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism or attacks on Muslims or other groups are unwelcome and won't go unchallenged.

In recent years, **Bloomington United's** energy didn't seem to be as necessary as it has become in the year since Donald Trump became president of the United States. Events in Charlottesville, Virginia, last summer and the general rise of groups who espouse white supremacist views have changed that equation.

It's with mixed emotions we acknowledge the re-formation of **Bloomington United**, which is relaunching with a news conference today. It's too bad there's a need for an organized response against hate speech and actions.

On the other hand, **Bloomington United** makes a strong statement that this is a city that welcomes people from all nations, cultures and faiths. The organizers and volunteers will keep our community focused on these strengths and help organize productive citizen reaction if groups that promote division and hatred come here to challenge that point of view.

Welcome back, **Bloomington United**. We wish we didn't need you, but we're glad you are engaged.

For more information, see Facebook: www.facebook.com/bloomingtonunited/ or Twitter: twitter.com/BUnited1998.

CITATION (AGLC STYLE)

Editorial staff, 'Bloomington United a necessary organization in divisive times', *Herald-Times* (online), 10 Jan 2018 <<https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.monroe.lib.in.us/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/16958F89343E5420>>