Book tells how Florida White supremacist had change of heart, mind

By Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler
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Don Black was one of the first individuals to appear on "Hate. Com," a 2000 HBO documentary. His Stormfront website, the narrator indicated, had established him as "the godfather of hate on the net."

The documentary also featured Derek Black, Don's 11-year-old son, and the godson of David Duke, a former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. Wearing a baseball cap adorned with a Confederate flag, Derek declared, "non-whites do not have the same values, ideals and beliefs that I have."

As a teenager, Derek Black became a White supremacist rock star. Host of DerekBlack.com, kids.stormfront.org, and his own radio show, he was elected a committeeman in Palm Beach County, Florida.

He was counting on Republicans to stake out a claim as America's White Party, Derek told his supporters: "We can infiltrate. We can take the country back."

One man's odyssey

Home-schooled by Don and Chloe Black, Derek got straight As in a local community college. In 2010, Florida's honors college accepted him as a transfer student. At New College in Sarasota, Derek began to question his views. In 2013, he publicly disavowed the White nationalist movement.

In "Rising Out of Hatred," Eli Saslow, a staff writer for the Washington Post, draws on hundreds of hours of interviews with Derek, Don Black and dozens of their associates, friends and family members to tell the story of one person's odyssey from the far-right fringe to the political mainstream.

The book also illuminates Americans' deeply entrenched differences over race, ethnicity and immigration.

Cultural lesson

Saslow attributes Derek's change of mind and heart to his intellectual curiosity and encounters with his fellow students. A voracious reader, Derek discovered that Europe had lagged behind the Islamic world in the Middle Ages.

Emphasizing their superior religion and culture, Europeans did not think of themselves as White. In the United States, Derek also learned, structures of White supremacy remain very much in place.

Welcomed, challenged

At New College, a bastion of liberalism and, some would say, political correctness, Derek was welcomed and challenged, at times by the same people. A native of Peru, Juan befriended him on orientation day.

Matthew, an Orthodox Jew, invited him to a Shabbat dinner. Allison refuted his ideas about racial science, psychology, affirmative action, and social justice with dozens of data-laden studies.

Attacking Derek was not productive, she told herself and her fellow students: "participate in diversity talks, be upset, and give a damn...talk about it, shed apathy, get involved, but do it constructively." In time, the friendship between Allison and Derek became a romantic relationship.

Moving narrative

Saslow's narrative is empathetic and often moving. He reminds us, for example, that as Derek thought and felt his way out of White supremacy, he had to deal with the disappointment, anger and ostracism of loving parents and relatives.

He also had to balance his desire for anonymity (and an academic career as a medievalist) with an obligation, born of guilt and shame, to make amends for the damage he had caused.

Not typical

That Derek has done so, with courage and compassion, serves as a reminder that he is not a typical White nationalist. He decided, after all, to attend liberal New College, to be open to new experiences, ideas, and intimate relationships with people he had believed were beneath him.

And so, as we approach a pivotal moment for our country, with White nationalism and the alt-right exploding into mainstream politics, and Stormfront's traffic tripling to 300,000 daily page views, it is not certain, alas, that Allison's admirable approach will lead many true believers to rise out of hatred.

Absent an alternative, however, it seems equally clear that we should keep trying.

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