



Former white nationalist talks about conversion at Holocaust Memorial Center

By: [Kayla Dimick](#) | [Southfield Sun](#) | Published April 10, 2019

FARMINGTON HILLS — A college kid attending weekly Shabbat dinners doesn't seem that out of the ordinary.

Until you learn he's a white nationalist.

Derek Black, who was long considered the heir apparent to the white nationalist movement, spoke on how he came to renounce his upbringing April 7 at the Holocaust Memorial Center Zekelman Family Campus in Farmington Hills.

During the program, Michigan Radio host Cynthia Canty interviewed Black before he answered questions from the audience. The members-only talk was followed by a kosher dessert reception.

“Through the lessons of the Holocaust, we show the importance of why each one of us must make responsible choices,” Holocaust Memorial Center CEO Rabbi Eli Mayerfeld said. “We cannot change the past, but we can make choices to make a better future together.”

Black was raised in Florida in a deeply rooted white nationalist family. His father, Don Black, founded white nationalism's first website, Stormfront. His godfather, David Duke, is a former Ku Klux Klan grand wizard. Black himself grew up advocating for white nationalism, running the kids page on Stormfront and taking on public speaking engagements.

White nationalism is an ideology centered around the belief that white people are a race, with the goal of developing and maintaining a white national identity. White nationalists seek to ensure the survival of the white race.



Former white nationalist Derek Black and Michigan Radio host Cynthia Canty take questions from the audience April 7 at the Holocaust Memorial Center Zekelman Family Campus in Farmington Hills. Black discussed how he came to leave white nationalism behind at the members-only event. *Photo by Donna Agusti*

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, white nationalist groups espouse white supremacist ideologies, often focusing on what they call the inferiority of nonwhites. They are affiliated with other groups, such as the KKK, neo-Confederates, neo-Nazis, racist skinheads and the Christian Identity group.

“When I was born, my family had already been advocating white nationalism for almost 30 years by that point, and their brand of it had been trying to mainstream it — trying to show that it could wear a suit and tie, that it could meet in hotel conference centers and have talks, and it could sound scientific, and that they could try to recruit average people,” Black said. “That was always their goal — it was not to get the weirdos on the fringe, but find the people who were almost there that had sort of pseudo-white supremacist ideas but needed the nudge.”

While attending New College of Florida, a classmate discovered Black’s true identity and outed him on a campus forum page, sparking a discussion on how the campus should handle a white nationalist.

Ultimately, Black was allowed to continue his education, but he was ostracized and moved off campus.

It wasn’t until he was invited to Shabbat on campus by a friend that he started questioning his beliefs.

Shabbat is Judaism’s day of rest, observed from a few minutes before sunset on Friday evening until three stars of the sky appear on Saturday night.

Black came to befriend that friend’s female roommate, and their relationship blossomed into a loving and trusting one.

Black said she consistently challenged his beliefs by presenting him with factual evidence, and over the course of two years, she proved to him that he was using bad science to back his beliefs.

“It was not the first time somebody had told me that we were wrong, that our evidence was wrong. It was just the first time that it had been a trusting friendship and it was not a public debate. I thought I could be a better white nationalist if I wasn’t using bad evidence, and I didn’t realize that was going to be a road that would completely dismantle my worldview.”

In July 2013, Black wrote a letter to the Southern Poverty Law Center, which was published on its website, describing his “gradual awakening process,” stating that he was abandoning white nationalism and no longer identified with it.

“I can’t support a movement that tells me I can’t be a friend to whomever I wish or that other people’s races require me to think about them in a certain way or be suspicious at their advancements,” Black said in his written statement.



Fenton residents Rhiannon Kulongowski, 11, and her mom, Dawn Kulongowski, listen to Black’s story April 7 at the event. *Photo by Donna Agusti*

Once his statement was live, Black said, he couldn't handle having a part of white nationalism, and he tried to hide from it and even changed his name.

“The last argument (his friend) and I had about this before moving into other things was that you just can't stop pushing white nationalism. You have to push back against it,” Black said. “That is the way this works. That is the way being a citizen in this world works. You can't just advocate bad things and then quit; you have to advocate good things, to simplify it.”

Black said he feels partially responsible for the numerous attacks against groups that have been made in the name of white nationalism, such as the 2015 Charleston church shooting.

“Every single time it happens, it drives home that I can't take ideas back. That this thing continues to grow, and when it does grow, there's some part of the seeds that I planted that are still there,” Black said. “That is an infinite sort of guilt. ... The only way I can sort of wrestle with it is to realize that I can't take things back, but I can keep pushing against it.”