

NOT IN OUR TOWN

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In the mid-1980s, some hate groups declared the northwestern part of the United States to be their “homeland.” These hate groups were becoming more and more violent in the region. In 1986, the Aryan Nations organization declared its intention to make the region a place where only whites and Christians could own property, vote, conduct business, bear arms, and hold public office. Incidents of harassment and violence against “minority” groups became more and more common. It was not long before Billings, a city in southern Montana, found itself the target of a series of hateful incidents. Billings, with a population of approximately 104,000 people, is the largest city in Montana and the commercial, shipping, and processing center of a region that produces cattle, wheat, and sugar beets. Billings is the gateway to Yellowstone National Park, the Crow Indian Reservation, and the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument.

In 1993, Ku Klux Klan flyers were distributed around Billings, tombstones in the Jewish cemetery were overturned; the home of a Native American family was spray-painted with swastikas; members of an African-American church were intimidated, and bricks were thrown through windows of homes that displayed *menorahs* for the Jewish holiday of Chanukah.

Rather than accept what was happening in their community, people decided to take a stand against hate. Those who were not targets became allies to those who were. City officials and law enforcement officers made strong statements against the activities. The Painters Union formed a work force to paint over the graffiti. Religious and community leaders sponsored human rights activities. The local newspaper printed full-page *menorahs* for display in homes and businesses throughout the town. Most of the 10,000 people who decided to display the *menorahs* were not Jewish; they displayed the symbols to show that they were unwilling to accept prejudice and hate in their community. In a show of support, people attended religious services at an African-American church where the congregation was being harassed and intimidated by members of hate groups.

Actions by the people of Billings, Montana became a model for other communities around the country who also spoke out against hate. The motto for such community actions became known as “Not in Our Town.”

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