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Other Voices

Hate crime, plain and simple

By Lee Baker

Guest Columnist

On June 6, Mary Few came home from work to find a cross burning in her yard. The next day, she and her husband Ed, discovered the letters KKK scrawled in red spray paint on the propane tank they use to fuel their wood-burning stove. The letters are on Old P员son Road in Middlesex — a small town near Greensboro that is home to just under 800 people in Nash County.

The Fews are African American and the few incidents around them have been reported by the Middlesex Police Chief Charles Ferrell, have been investigated as a hate crime. Middlesex Police Chief Charles Ferrell, however, believes the incidents do not constitute hate crimes, because they were motivated by simple anonyms and therefore they were "taciturn and a few other weird things," not a hate crime. He may be right, technically.

According to North Carolina law, a person can be prosecuted under the Ethnic Intimidation statute when the perpetrator commits an act against a person or their property because of "race, color, belief, national origin, or ancestry." Apparently, the harassment and intimidation experienced by the Fews was committed because Ed Few refused to sell his 1974 Corvette for $1,200. According to Ed Few, the harassment and intimidation began after he refused to sell his car, the phone calls continued with racial epithets and threats that neither he nor his officers are pursuing this case aggressively, but he also acknowledges that the Few family has not been totally cooperative.

In some respects, not pursuing these incidents as a hate crime is similar to not prosecuting Mohammed Saleh for a terrorist attack after he used a Jeep Grand Cherokee to plow over a crowd of students at UNC Chapel Hill last March because he wanted to "punish the government of the United States for [its] actions around the world." In both cases, the law precludes common sense. However, it appears that Police Chief Ferrell has no sense at all. In an interview with WRAL, he told a reporter, "at the point in time, I'm not ready to rule this as a hate crime. I'm thinking this is more of a grudge or some kind of personal vendetta-type thing," after all, "it was not your true shape of a cross, it was more like a capital "T".

North Carolina has a history of terrorism, much of it racially motivated. In the wake of recent findings by the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot Commission and the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the history of violence and terror in our state is particularly raw. Whatever the original motive of the harassment, once racial epithets are hurled, crosses or cross-like structures are set ablaze, and the letters KKK are used to deface a black family's property, a threshold is crossed and history is in play. It is not time to begin splitting legal hairs or making a distinction between lower and upper case letters. It is time to use common sense and stop the spread of hate crimes and terrorism in North Carolina.

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