



HEATHER HEYER FOUNDATION

Statement of

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House Committee on Oversight and Reform
Subcommittee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties

“Confronting White Supremacy (Part I): The Consequences of Inaction”

Wednesday, May 15, 2019

Chairman Raskin, Ranking Member Roy, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Susan Bro and I am the mother of Heather Heyer. I am the co-founder and president of the Heather Heyer Foundation, which was created to honor the memory of Heather, a young civil rights activist who dedicated her life to promoting equal rights for all people. The foundation has established a scholarship program to provide financial assistance to individuals passionate about positive social change.

Allow me to tell the story of why I am testifying before you today. Several years ago, as a black student in Charlottesville City Schools studied Civil War history, she questioned why there were statues celebrating Confederate war heroes in the city parks. She began a petition to have them removed. She gathered enough signatures to bring to the city council. In February 2017, the Charlottesville City Council voted to remove the statues.

A local self-proclaimed white supremacist organized a protest to the statue’s removal. He was joined by national leaders from a variety of white supremacist movements, including the KKK, The Traditionalist Worker Party, the Alt Right, and neo-Nazis from 35 states. The call was sent out under the pretense of protecting freedom of speech and white rights.

They opened the weekend with a tiki torch march on the University of Virginia lawn on the evening of Friday, August 11, 2017, clashing violently with students and faculty. The night rang with chants of “Blood and Soil” and “Jews will not replace us!” They also chanted, “You will not replace us,” and “Into the ovens!”

Saturday’s protest was to begin at noon on August 12, 2017. As early as 8:30 in the morning, hate-filled protestors began to arrive and converge on the downtown park by the statue. Some arrived with knuckles taped for fighting, carrying shields, bats, wooden poles, and wearing

helmets. Some arrived with semi-automatic weapons. Some carried knives. Violent clashes with counter-protestors erupted throughout the day.

My daughter, Heather, was part of a group of peaceful counter-protestors who stayed away from the areas of violence. They gathered along the opposite side of the downtown mall from the areas of fighting while chanting and singing songs of solidarity. As Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe declared a state of emergency, the Virginia State Police declared the assembly unlawful and the park by the statue began to clear out.

My daughter was caught on film talking to one of the helmeted girls as they were packing up their cars and leaving. Heather asked her why she was there and if she could talk about why she felt hate for others. The girl simply answered, "No comment," to every question.

Heather's group was joined by other counter protestors who were relieved it was all over and the haters were leaving. The group decided to head up Fourth Street to meet up at the downtown mall for celebrating. What they did not know was a young man from Ohio was sitting at the top of the hill of that street watching them.

Earlier in the day, he was filmed chanting Nazi slogans and marching with a Nazi shield, while wearing the white polo and khakis requested by organizers. He had started down the street in his car a few minutes before and then backed up to sit a moment. Seeing a diverse crowd, he perceived to be in support of black and brown people, he hit the accelerator, and drove his car into the people gathered.

Bodies flew into the air or were smashed into the ground. My daughter spun through the air, smashing his front windshield, leaving behind blood and skin. Her body then fell to the ground. As he began to shift into reverse, people raced up to smash his rear windshield trying to stop him. He raced back up the street, running over some people coming and going. He ran over others who had raced down the street to help. Between 30 to 40 people were injured that day. My daughter died almost immediately as she bled out internally and externally.

Hate crimes are on the rise in this country. According to the FBI's released statistics for 2017, there was a 17% increase in hate crime from 2016 to 2017.ⁱⁱⁱ This is the third consecutive increase in reported hate crime. In Virginia, there was an almost 50% increase in hate crime reported for 2017.ⁱⁱⁱ

Yet we have major loopholes in the hate crime reporting system that result in local agencies failing to accurately report hate crimes. None of the victims of the car attack in Charlottesville are included in the FBI's 2017 Uniform Crime Reporting data, despite being some of the most high profile hate crimes of 2017. In fact, Charlottesville Police only reported one hate crime for 2017, and it occurred a few months after the car attack.^{iv} I was saddened to learn that Heather's murder was not the only hate crime to go unreported. Exactly one year to the day prior, the hate crime murder of Khalid Jabara in Tulsa, Oklahoma also went unreported.

We do not have accurate information about the actual number of hate crimes that occur. To offer an accurate diagnosis, a doctor must have a full understanding of the symptoms. To adequately address the crisis of hate crimes, we need an accurate picture of how many hate crimes occur.

That is why it is imperative that congress take up legislation that would address the issue of underreporting. I understand there is currently draft legislation in circulation, the focus of which is the improved hate crime data collection and reporting. The proposed title of this legislation is the “Khalid Jabara and Heather Heyer Hate Crime Reporting Act.”^v

Accurate reporting of hate crime data will allow us to better combat this scourge of hate, provide for increased law enforcement training, and determine how to best allocate resources.

Addressing hate crimes is not a partisan issue. I am confident that Members of Congress can work together to address this crisis. Coming together to improve hate crime reporting can serve as a unifying first step.

It is my hope that the work we do here today can prevent other mothers and fathers from feeling the pain of losing a child to hate.

ⁱ DOJ Office of Public Affairs, “Ohio Man Pleads Guilty to 29 Federal Hate Crimes for August 2017 Car Attack at Rally in Charlottesville. James Alex Fields Jr. Pleaded Guilty to Killing Heather Heyer and Injuring Dozens of Others” (2019 March 27). Retrieved at <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/ohio-man-pleads-guilty-29-federal-hate-crimes-august-2017-car-attack-rally-charlottesville>.

ⁱⁱ FBI 2017 Hate Crime Statistics (2018 November 18) Retrieved at <https://www.justice.gov/hatecrimes/hate-crime-statistics> on 3/26/19.

ⁱⁱⁱ State Police: Hate Crimes Increased Nearly 50%,” Woolsey, Angela; Fairfax Times (2018 June 1) Retrieved at http://www.fairfaxtimes.com/articles/state-police-hate-crimes-in-virginia-increased-by-nearly-percent/article_e864616a-65b5-11e8-baf1-a70a0ffbd2cb.html on 3/26/18.

^{iv} FBI 2017 Hate Crime Statistics (2018 November 18) Retrieved at <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-3-crime/2017/tables/table-14-state-cuts/virginia.xls> on 3/26/19.

^v Maya Berry, “Charlottesville Won’t Show Up in Federal Hate Crime Stats” (2018 September 21) Retrieved at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2018/09/24/charlottesville-wont-show-up-federal-hate-crime-stats/>.