

New human rights coalition taking shape

Activist Tony Stewart shares advice during meeting in Moscow

By Holly Bowen

Daily News staff writer

Several dozen human rights activists and concerned community members from around the region gathered Saturday at the University of Idaho in Moscow to set the foundation for the Northwest Coalition for Human Rights, a new organization devoted to combating hate in the Inland Northwest.

Participants shared recent volunteer efforts, heard from speakers and brainstormed

ideas for forming the new group, which "exists to facilitate connections and communication among organizations and individuals who are engaged in human rights and social justice work in the Northwest," according to the coalition's newsletter and website.

"We consider the scope of human rights activity to include freedom from hunger, poverty and discrimination, as well as access to a healthy environment, personal safety, affordable housing, potable water, education,

medical care, as well as other rights," the newsletter and website state.

Following a buffet lunch, participants of Saturday's meeting received some words of wisdom from one of the region's most prominent human rights activists, former North Idaho College political science instructor Tony Stewart.

Stewart is one of the founding members of the Kootenai County Task Force on Human Relations, which was established in 1981 after members of the Aryan Nations white supremacy movement harassed a Jewish restaura-

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Dean Hare/Daily News
Tony Stewart, chairman of the Kootenai County Task Force on Human Relations, speaks during a meeting on Saturday in Moscow.

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rant owner and biracial family in the Coeur d'Alene area.

Stewart recalled how the task force in 1984 recruited Coeur d'Alene priest Bill Wassmuth as its president. Wassmuth, who died in 2002, was outspoken against hate and was a target of the Aryan Nations, who in 1986 blew up part of his house with a pipe bomb.

Wassmuth later became director of the Northwest Coalition Against Malicious Harassment, which originated in Coeur d'Alene in 1987 but later moved to Seattle, merged with a Portland-based group and then "lost their mission," Stewart said.

Losing its focus is just about the worst thing a human rights organization can do, he said. He lauded local organizations like the Latah County Human Rights Task Force for

staying on track and using proceeds to support their missions.

"They don't have staff or buildings, but they have remarkable volunteers" who work within the legal system to help fight discrimination in housing, employment and other areas, he said.

He said members of the community stop donating to human rights organizations if too much of their budgets go to paying rent, salaries or other nonprogramming expenses.

"Never forget why you exist," he said. "If you do, you will die."

He advised members of the new coalition to maximize their donations by working together, spreading the word and never taking their eyes off their mission of fighting hate.

"Be willing to take the criticism," he added. "You will be criticized, and you will be attacked."

Stewart advocated a strategy of being both proactive and reactive. He said the Kootenai

County Task Force on Human Relations makes a point to not attend events put on by hate groups but instead hosts alternative events at the same time.

"Martin Luther King Jr. never went to a Klan rally or a cross burning," he said. "He was too smart."

In closing, Stewart shared an example from the late 1990s when the Aryan Nations marched through Coeur d'Alene. The human rights task force encouraged people to pledge money for each minute the hate group marched — \$34,000 was raised.

"We thanked (former Aryan Nations leader) Richard Butler for raising money for diversity," Stewart said as the audience laughed.

Information about the Northwest Coalition for Human Rights can be found online at <http://nwchr.wordpress.com>.

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