

Title: Respect Rally aims to rise above neo-Nazis.(Metropolitan Times)(Metropolitan Life)

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Ignore the American Nationalist Party?

That's exactly what a rainbow coalition of local civil rights and community organizations wants Washingtonians to do. Rather than join counterprotests of the neo-Nazi group that will hold marches on Washington tomorrow, spend your time and energy at a more peaceful protest.

Participate in the "Respect Rally" at the Lincoln Memorial at 2 p.m. It will be far enough from the madding crowd to dissuade confrontations like those that occurred when the Ku Klux Klan marched here in 1990.

Certainly, all people of goodwill would like nothing more than for these neo-Nazi hatemongers to become members of an endangered or, better yet, extinct species. In light of recent racist crimes - such as the arson at synagogues in Sacramento, Calif., and the minority killings committed by white supremacist Benjamin Smith of Illinois - these bigots appear to be getting bolder and more sophisticated, spewing their angry messages of hate and destruction on the uncensored and unregulated World Wide Web.

"For every white supremacist [at the neo-Nazi march] there should be a thousand white people [at the Respect Rally] making it clear that we want diversity and that we will defend our family and friends of color," said Rachel Pentlarge of Jews United for Justice.

Besides lobbying legislators to pass stricter hate-crime legislation, what are well-meaning people left to do, particularly when these purveyors of prejudice proudly parade in the full light of day? Plenty.

"There are those who say if we remain silent, the Nazis will go unheard. But, imagine for a moment, if no one ever spoke out against hatred for fear they would encourage those who hate. What kind of society would we live in, and who would fill the vacuum left by those who remain?" asked David Bernstein, Washington area director of the American Jewish Committee.

"We also cannot stand idly as violent purveyors of hate burn down houses of worship and perpetrate acts of violence against minorities," Mr. Bernstein added during a press conference held purposely at the Hunan Chinatown restaurant owned by community leader Linda Lee to demonstrate the diversity of rally organizers.

Fitting also that the Respect Rally organizers chose the Lincoln Memorial to hold their peaceful protest since it symbolizes freedom and national unity, and it was the site of the historic 1963 civil rights march on Washington.

The afternoon Respect Rally program aims to "shine a light on understanding" and "stand up for pluralism and respect and oppose neo-Nazi hatred." It will include D.C. Mayor Anthony A. Williams, D.C. Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton, sports mogul and philanthropist Abe Pollin and a host of performers.

The core group of approximately 40 sponsors whose organizations are dedicated to diversity and equality includes the Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington, the National Conference of Community and Justice (formerly the National Conference of Christians and Jews), the American Jewish Committee, the Latino Civil Rights Center, the Coalition of Korean American Organizations, the D.C. branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the Progressive National Baptist Convention.

"The neo-Nazi march is a reminder to all of us that we cannot be complacent about malice. There will always be groups on the fringes who make a lot of noise and spout messages of hate," said Cheryl Kravitz, executive director of the National Conference of Community and Justice.

"These grim reminders of how much work must be done to build understanding have spurred conversations about how individuals and groups should respond when confronted with bigotry," Ms. Kravitz said.

However, she said "it's not just what you do on one day but every day" that counts. So she is urging people to attend a NCCJ-sponsored dialogue on confronting prejudice on Tuesday evening at the Martin Luther King Library.

Because rally organizers believe all citizens have a right to free speech, they are strongly urging people to avoid confrontational counter-rallies along the neo-Nazi's march route as a way to avoid feeding the attention the marchers seek.

"We are not protesting their right to march, we are protesting their message of hate and intolerance," said Lee M. Diamond, director of the American Jewish Committee. "Wouldn't it be nice if the marchers just found themselves preaching only to the converted?"

But Mr. Bernstein noted that "whenever groups with such views come to the nation's capital, there's sure to be extensive media attention, no matter what organizations such as ours choose to do. . . . We want to make sure that a more affirmative, less provocative message is heard as well."

At tomorrow's peaceful protest, participants will be asked to recite a pledge "to respect people's differences; to add my voice to the chorus of diversity; to shine the light of understanding wherever I am."

For those who can't attend the Respect Rally, organizers are asking peace-loving people to keep on their car headlights from 3 to 6 p.m. while the neo-Nazis are marching. Also to look for opportunities to spread positive messages throughout the day with the word "respect" written on paper buttons, lawn cards and window placards.

Ignore ignorance? Absolutely. Rally for respect? Indeed.

* For information about the Respect Rally, call David Bernstein of the AJC at 202/785-4200. For more information about the follow-up dialogue, call Cheryl Kravitz at 202/822-6110.

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