

I WAS A VIOLENT SKINHEAD,

Frank Meeink

as told to Laura D'Angelo

When Frank Meeink was a child, he was a teacher's pet. No one would have guessed then that he would become a vicious neo-Nazi skinhead. But that's what he did. It took Frank a long time to realize how misguided and pathetic his life as a neo-Nazi was. Today, Frank deeply regrets his violent, hateful past and is trying to make up for it. He shared his shocking story with *Scope* writer Laura D'Angelo.

My parents divorced when I was one. I lived in a tough part of Philadelphia with my mom. We were very close. That all changed when I was 11, and her boyfriend moved in. He was jealous of our relationship. I couldn't even talk to my mom without him criticizing me.

The two of them started drinking. He'd get furious at me for stupid things. Once he beat me up in front of my friends because I hadn't cleaned the basement. When I was 13, I couldn't control my rage at him anymore. I got into a huge fight with him, and my mom sent me packing to live with my dad.

I felt even more alone when I moved in with my dad and his new wife. They were never around, and I just did what I wanted to do. It seemed like there was no place for me and nobody cared. That summer, I went to live with my cousins and my aunt in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Hooked on Hate

In Lancaster, I shared a room with my 16-year-old cousin. He was a skinhead and hung out with skinheads. They all shaved their heads and wore black boots and flight jackets.

The skinheads treated me like I was their little brother. They made me feel protected. I thought they were so cool. I read all the skinhead pamphlets. They said whites are superior, and that all blacks, Jews, gays, and foreigners are evil. By August, my head was shaved, my boots were black, and I was preaching white supremacy to anyone who would listen.

In the fall, I moved back in with my mom. When my skinhead friends visited me, we'd get drunk and go on "beat downs." We'd target blacks and gays, and unload on them with bricks, baseball bats, chains,

knives, and boxcutters. It wasn't before long I was expelled from school for knocking out a black kid's teeth.

More rage and violence

I started roaming the country, hanging out with skinheads. I had a swastika tattooed on my neck. One night, I got really drunk and depressed. I thought, "What am I doing with my life?" I was 16 and had 15 warrants out for my arrest. I felt like nobody loved me.

I went to stay with some skinheads I knew in Springfield, Illinois. A friend and I decided to create a skinhead talk show for public access television in Springfield. We were instant celebrities. We recruited 40 new skinheads in two months. I even fell in love with a skinhead girl named Carin.

It was in Springfield on Christmas Eve in 1992 that three of us got drunk and kidnapped a guy from a rival gang. We hated him because his ideas were different from ours. We tortured him for 14 hours. We kicked in his teeth and put his head through the wall. Then we warned him to keep his mouth shut and let him go. He went straight to the cops.

Two weeks later, I was arrested. I knew I was going to get locked up and I was terrified. I was 17, tried and convicted as an adult, and on my way to prison. On top of that, I found out I was going to be a father. "Congratulations! You got what you always wanted," said Carin in a letter to me. It was true. I wanted a baby—someone in my life who would always love me.

Prison

First I was in isolation and only allowed out one hour a week to use the phone and take a shower. I was allowed one book a week. I grabbed the fattest one first, the Bible.

When I was moved into the general prison population, a black guy named Abel invited me to a prayer group. At one point, I was holding hands with another black guy, praying. I remember thinking, "This feels just like my dad's hand." This was really confusing, so I pushed it out of my mind.

I signed up for the basketball, soccer, and football teams. When I'd score a touchdown, the black guys would say, "Good run, white boy," and hug me. This went against everything I stood for, but I thought, "Prison is a different world. When I get out, I'll be true to my race."

The only other guy my age was black. His name was Little G, and he worked with me in the chow hall. When I told Little G that I was afraid Carin was cheating on me, he'd say, "Man, don't worry. She's waiting for you." The older white prisoners would say, "Oh, yeah. She's cheating on you."

It struck me that Little G was a better friend to me than any of the white guys.

Back home

I was released from prison seven months later. I was glad to see my old friends in Springfield, but they'd say things like, "Blacks are worthless." I'd think, "What do they know?" They never met Abel or Little G or probably any black person. But I didn't say anything. It was hard to admit that the people I admired were wrong — that my "success" as a skinhead was based on ignorance.

Carin had left the movement and was devoting herself to our daughter, Bailey. It upset her that I still associated with my old friends. Our relationship cracked under the strain, so I headed back to Philadelphia.

I was having a hard time finding a job. My swastika tattoo got in the way. I was shocked when this Jewish guy, Keith, hired me to haul furniture. I guess he figured I was a messed up kid, and he wanted to give me a second chance.

Keith was the first Jewish person I had ever known. I grew to love him and it made me sick that he might think I secretly hated him. I got my swastika tattoo removed.

Then came the Oklahoma City bombing in 1996. When I saw the photograph of a fireman carrying out a dead little girl, I cried for days. I knew how devastated I would be if I lost my daughter. The faces of my victims came rushing at me. For the first time, I thought about all the people I had hurt. I felt terrible. I knew I could never make it up to my victims. But I wanted to try to make it right.

A new beginning

I stopped hanging out with my skinhead friends. I grew out my hair and tossed away my boots. I started talking with people at the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), a group that fights discrimination. I came up with an idea to use sports to bring together black and white kids. After all, sports were the key to my turnaround. The ADL, the Philadelphia Flyers hockey team, and the city department of recreation got together and started a program called Harmony Through Hockey. I started working with kids.

I'm 24 now. I speak at high schools and colleges. I tell kids who are dabbling in hate groups that they are headed for a life of pain, loneliness, and remorse. I tell them they can't beat back their misery by hurting others.

I know I can never make up for the lives I've damaged, maybe even destroyed. My victims paid a price for my hatred and that makes me feel awful. I put so much negativity into the world. Now it's time to make positive contributions.

Skill builders. Think about it!

WRITE ABOUT OR DISCUSS YOUR ANSWERS TO THESE QUESTIONS.

1. If Frank's cousin had been a baseball star instead of a skinhead, do you think Frank would still have become a skinhead? Why?
2. Who do you think is responsible for Frank's becoming a skinhead? Explain.
3. What else could Frank do to try to make up for his violent, hateful past?

Word match

Match each vocabulary word with its definition.

- | |
|---------------------|
| _____ 1. supremacy |
| _____ 2. isolation |
| _____ 3. struck |
| _____ 4. associated |
| _____ 5. defamation |
- a. occurred to
b. had contact
c. hate speech
d. being the best
e. being kept alone