

---

*It wasn't enough for me to physically remove myself.*

---

**Lauren Manning**

I'm Lauren, I'm 28 years old. I live just outside of Toronto, Ontario and I volunteer with an organization called "life after hate", which works to help individuals disengage from hate groups. I spent 5 years in hate groups and remember how difficult it is to leave that toxic network behind. I also hope to make amends for the damage I once did.

It's just like an addiction; I was attracted to it because I was looking for somewhere I could escape to where I felt significant in my own mind.

I was raised in an middle class family and from the outside; we looked like we had everything. Since I was a kid, something just internally felt really "off", like I wasn't comfortable in my own skin.

My dad was sick with cancer since I was 7 years old. My grandfather was toxic and would regularly make nasty comments about my weight, my appearance, my academic short comings at school and anything else he could find. I didn't know what to do about my grandfathers actions; I tried to loose weight, but it seemed no matter what I did, it was never good enough for him.

My dad was my best friend and died when I was 16, there after I was left with this huge void.

I started self harming and binge drinking, however I found those weren't enough to fill that void.

I joined the movement when I was 17. I met the guy who recruited me, he be-friended me and made me feel like I mattered. He didn't need to put in much effort to recruit me, I already thought he was cool and the idea of this secret club he was in sounded interesting. The brainwashing

didn't start all at once. Little by little, I would say something in conversation and he would lead into his own narrative about the alleged victimization of the white race. He told me that I was better than those around me... He referred to everyone else as 'sheep' and told me that it was good to be different. It was easy for me to feel opposed to the mainstream since I didn't feel accepted by those around me.

Anytime I was with him and his friends, that's when trouble started.

No matter what, it seemed like they always had each other's backs. I liked this because I wasn't getting this sense of 'family' at home. I was angry and they accepted it without question, even showing me where to direct it. I was taught to fear all these people who weren't white. Mostly though, I feared interacting with them because they might prove the ideology wrong. I made an account on Stormfront and educated myself every day so that I could throw the movements rhetoric at other people. In hindsight I had no back up information for all this propaganda... Just what I saw on racist sites. To prove to myself how committed I was, I shaved the underside of my head and got the numbers "1488" tattooed across the side of my neck, then later got a few more hateful tattoos.

I met one of the big Canadian figure heads at the time. We often went to his meetings and met a number of other suit Nazi's. They were impressed with me and gradually involved me in more of their events. Someone I barely knew started a debate with me online, so I threatened them and they reported it to the police. My mom sat there in the interview room with me and cried when the officer read what I wrote to this individual. She kicked me out the next day and told me that I could come back when I stopped all the non sense. I was away from home for the next few years. The only times my family heard anything of me was when police became involved. They received phone calls informing them about warrants I had, incidents where I got injured badly and the one time I threatened to end my life.

I left the first skinhead group after repeated conflicts with them.

One night, we spray painted hate symbols all over a store front right near our apartment building and posted pictures on social media... The next night someone threw a rock through the front window of the place. That story and those pictures later made it onto this hate watch site. The group assumed I ratted them out since I was already fed up with all the repeated drama going on within their circle. It was just easier for them to blame me. They set up a plan to beat me up and de-patch me. I was jumped from behind by them. I ended up with a bad concussion, which took months to treat. Eventually I found a bigger group of skinheads to hangout with. This particular group seemed a little better organized than the previous one. They flirted more with the idea of segregation and wanted to build their own community of all white people.

I felt welcomed in this bigger group. They were tied with the hate music scene, and once I told them I played bass and could help set up the shows, they took an immediate liking to me.

I left the movement when I was 22 years old. Another member was murdered because he was doing collections, went to someone's house un-invited and was stabbed to death by the home owner. I got along really well with him, so of course the grief was hard to deal with. His mother posted a note on social media expressing how the loss was affecting her and her family. The part that hit me read "I lost my son when he became involved in these groups and now I've lost him forever".

This guys death began to give me some clarity... I came to a conclusion that I may as well have signed a death waiver when I joined the movement. It triggered something in my mind and I remembered all the times my family received phone calls about me; how did they feel about those?

My mom welcomed me back home on a few conditions and we were starting to get along for the first time in many years. My family did not deserve to receive a phone call like that. The members in the group twisted the story around, ignoring the note from this guy's mother. They claimed that someone attacked him due to his affiliation... When the reality is that he walked into that death trap himself. I began questioning the victim mentality. I thought that if we're in fact the ones creating this misery for ourselves, then what's the point? It wasn't any other race's fault that we were where we were in life. We all chose to be there and we could also choose to leave.

I found myself in a constant debate with my boyfriend at this time. He and the other members were really laying into me about having kids, in their efforts to continue the white race. They liked having me there participating in their gatherings, but were also attached to ideas about how it's a woman's role is one of subservience; women were to raise the kids. I didn't want kids. I also really questioned whether I could raise them into a movement like this after hearing what happened to my friend. I couldn't raise a kid to hate another kid who's done nothing to deserve it. This was a pivotal moment for me... Deep down I knew all of this was wrong.

The other members could probably tell I was starting to detach... I just wasn't engaged by the conversations anymore. Near the end of my involvement, I'd often just be sitting there, keeping to myself. I was slowly cutting ties with the group and eventually split up with my boyfriend. Some sent me messages on social media demanding to know why I wasn't around anymore. Some tried to convince me to stay. I continued getting messages and add requests from them, which I ignored and deleted. I have to admit that there were times I was tempted to go back out of loneliness and there were more times I was afraid of running into one of them in public.

### **It wasn't enough for me to physically remove myself.**

The hard-wiring was another difficulty I was facing after leaving the movement.

I made friends who don't look like me and they were cool enough to accept me even with my past. I never verbalized it in front of them, but for a long time when I'd see them I'd immediately think a racial slur. I felt terrible about this; I'd be mentally asking myself how I could think that about my friend. I decided to learn critical thinking skills and reflected on my own past while in the movement. I figured out I had no reason to fear or hate these people.

For instance; I had a black friend when I took a college course; his name's Schavon. I was still in the movement at this time, but I met him in my class and we got along very well. He shared my dirty sense of humor and on many occasions we drove the teacher nuts because we became a class-clown duo.

I used to think that racial segregation was a good idea. The reality is that if we segregated, I'd never get to talk to Schavon again and I would miss him.

Going further back, one night in my early involvement a drunken riot broke loose. Me and a few others went running out onto the main road covered in blood and bruises. Two black guys came running over asking if they could help us. They called help for us and stayed until it got there. They were willing to do that even though we were covered in hate symbols.

It really threw me off guard at the time. I was taught that everyone else was out to harm us. What just happened was the literal opposite; our stupidity got us hurt and two kind people wanted to help. I believe these people came into my life for a reason. I consider myself very lucky that they did. They were people I learned to hate, but eventually overlooked the differences. They all looked beyond my questionable image and brought out good parts of me that I buried. They all helped me when I didn't deserve it. I also had a huge contradiction of my own back then

The white power movement is blatantly homophobic. I dated a girl in secret at one point when I was actively involved in hate. I felt like a total hypocrite, but I really liked her. I felt bad that I had to keep it quiet, but in hindsight maybe that was for the best; she did not need to see any of the crap which goes on in this movement.

### **Resentment is another thing I've had to overcome.**

Fact is, now a days I don't hate my ex-friends or hold a grudge towards them.

It took me a few years to get to this point, but I had to keep in mind that I was once there too.

When I started getting involved with life after hate, I never saw two stories that were the exact same, however I did see similarities. I realized that I am no different then anyone else who has ever set foot within the white power movement, then later cut ties with it. Regarding anti-racist groups, I let go of my grudge towards them too. I have to say that I've had good experiences with them since I left hate. I've run into them a few times and never had a problem diffusing the situation. Everytime I have always had a civilized conversation with them and shook hands to make peace.

### **I did all the practical stuff in order to move forward in life.**

I got a good job working in construction. I've been doing that for 5 years now and met all kinds of different personalities there. My job gave me something I could be proud of, also helping with my self esteem. It allowed me to get to know new people. I can be myself there and not have to worry about judgement. I laugh in my head sometimes about how I went from a movement that percieved women as second class to working in a male dominated profession. I wouldn't change a thing about that part of my journey.

I repaired relationships with my family. It took alot of time and patience, but now I have their full support for what I'm currently doing.

I'm in a healthy relationship now; I've been with my partner for almost 2 years. We were friends before we started dating, there for he already knew everything about my past. Honesty in this relationship was and still is the best course of action. He also keeps me out of trouble, so I'm lucky to have him.

I needed to do something about my racist tattoos, so I got one of them fully laser removed and two others covered with positive images that reflect who I am today. The cover ups were fun to do; my artist specializes in cover ups and has a good attitude towards it; he would never tattoo hate symbols on someone, but he's more then happy to cover them.

The laser removal on the other hand... Let's just say that even though I was impressed with the results, I'm happy I don't ever have to do that again. It hurts way more then getting a tattoo. I have a video on my phone of me getting it done, which I showed my friends and co-workers. Some of them were in agony just watching it.

Getting that old ink removed and covered was a huge relief. Those symbols used to define every interaction I had with people. Now I get compliments on my new artwork and I don't need to try to explain my past right away.

To conclude, I've learned to accept everyone as a human being. I've learned to accept myself as such too. I don't have borders anymore; I can freely explore anything I want without having to worry about what a bunch of hate subscribers are going to say about it.

