

## INTERVIEW

## Shining the Spotlight on Injustice: An Interview with Morris Dees

Joanie Eppinga

*Morris Dees, a well-known human rights crusader and lawyer who has brought successful suits against the Ku Klux Klan, the White Aryan Resistance, and the Aryan Nations, among others, is a founder of the Southern Poverty Law Center. The Center has a commitment to racial equality, which it enacts through legal action, tolerance education programs, and the monitoring of hate groups. Dees spoke with our editor on November 14, 2006.*

**JHS:** *What is your response to those who say it's better to not give any energy to those who espouse racist or otherwise negative viewpoints?*

**DEES:** First of all, I'd say that if you have individuals that are espousing hateful messages in a community, then it's important to shine the spotlight on them so people can understand what they're doing. To ignore them would be like ignoring a cancer, because it can grow. People ignored Adolf Hitler and his little gang as they had their little parties in beer gardens around Munich, figuring that they'd just go away. I'm not saying that's what would happen today in America if some hate group in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho was left simmering in the quiet of the woods without anybody ever knowing about it. But we cannot take the chance. It's important to expose not only that hate groups exist, but also the fallacies of the ideas they espouse.

**JHS:** *What do you say to people who claim that when you fight against these people, you're not helping because you're just adding to the conflict?*

**DEES:** I think that's a rather naïve attitude about how you deal with people who would kill people, harm people, plant bias and prejudice the minds of children to hate people based on their gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and color. If you say we "fight back" as if we take our gloves off and meet them with fists in the street, this would be incorrect. If fighting back means you tell the truth about what they're saying—that Jews are not evil, that they're not trying to subvert the Aryan race, or that black people are just as competent as white people intelligence-wise, all the issues—if you give the other side of the issue that these people are presenting in a hateful way, then that is not a wrong thing to do. Most of these hate groups don't deal with

the truth; they couldn't care less about the truth. If you look at their material, 95% of what they say—of what most demagogues say—it's a total lie. Their hateful material is just a click away on the web for any child. Also, our taking them to court for hurting people and then putting them out of the hate business with massive judgments is using the American justice system in the best way possible.

JHS: *Are children the main focus of your efforts?*

DEES: No. I think that people in general—those who are the victims of hate—gays, lesbians, people of color, people of different ethnicities, immigrants, et cetera—are our focus. We know that people from 14-25 years old commit most hate crimes. And I think the reason they commit these crimes is that many young people are exposed to extreme violence and prejudice. They usually learn it first in their families, and then from their contemporaries. Many of them are lonely kids who are seeking out people who are like themselves. And that's why they get on the Internet looking for others who share the same views. It's a virtual hate group. These kids might not be able to find a Klan or a neo-Nazi group and wouldn't want to be caught in one of those meetings. But in the anonymity of their own bedrooms, they can click on the Internet—there are six or seven hundred hate websites — and start finding a community of like-minded young people. A kid in Idaho can talk to a kid in Texas, to one in New York, to another in Alabama, and find they have things in common. They begin e-mailing. They send text messages. And sooner or later, you're going to have a Timothy McVeigh emerge thinking, "Unless I take some action, America's going to go to hell in a handbasket." And that's the result of the teachings of hate. I guess you'd say that Timothy McVeigh is a great example of what can go awry when you have an exchange of hateful ideas with little effective counterpoint.

JHS: *What do you see as being the future of hate in America?*

DEES: In America, as in most countries in the world, we live in a community of "us" and "them." The "us" and "them" change from time to time. When the Irish came to the United States, they were white, like the 17 million or so people that lived here other than the slaves. When they came in the 1840s, several million during a few years, they were universally hated because they were culturally different from the British that had settled this country. They spoke a different language, not the King's English. They competed for jobs. They were accused of being drunks and criminals. There were signs that said "No Irish person should apply for this job." There were lynchings of Irish workers during that massive migration. That might be hard for people to understand today. It took 110 years from the

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time John F. Kennedy's grandfather, Patrick Kennedy, came to the country, until JFK was elected president.

Today people hate Latinos, and the same basic argument is used against them that was used against the Irish. They're a much smaller percentage of the population today than the Irish immigrants were. They speak a different language, they're competing for jobs, the President is talking about building a 700-mile fence, he's calling the National Guard out, they are being gouged when they try to rent apartments, yet their labor is needed to keep the American economy going. Same hate—different “us” and “them.” I predict that we will elect an American of Latino descent president one day.

You're always going to have biases and prejudices. I wouldn't want to use the word *hate*, but you're always going to have biases and prejudice when those who they see may take away that privilege and power threaten those who have some privilege or power. Hopefully, as time progresses we will move along a continuum of more love, respect, acceptance, and tolerance. That's why we have our Teaching Tolerance program. We think it's important to teach tolerance and acceptance as well as fighting hate in court.

JHS: *Do you see the classroom as the most effective place to teach tolerance?*

DEES: I don't think there is *a* most effective way to deal with biases and prejudices. I think there are many ways. Clearly the best place would be in the home, where many young people are engrained with biases and prejudices from their parents, playmates, and siblings. It's hard for us to reach that audience; it's so massive. There are ways that this can be done—through churches, synagogues, mosques, and community leaders. The place that we've chosen to deal with this issue is K-12 and college. There's no universal fix.

It's much like the campaign to keep highways litter-free that was launched 35 or 40 years ago, with the ad of an Indian standing by the road with a tear coming out of his eye when trash thrown out of a passing car landed against his feet. It took a while to clean up the rubbish on America's highways. They're not perfectly clean today, but fewer people throw things out the window now. Today a young person might put it in a sack and throw it in a trashcan. A long-term program of teaching tolerance may take years. When you have tolerance taught from the President of the United States down to the local level through business and church leaders, schools, colleges, and other places, then I think we'll clean up some of this hate along the byways of this country.

JHS: *What keeps you passionate about this cause?*

DEES: When I was a small boy, we stood out in front of our little country school and recited the pledge of allegiance. The line that I remember so well was, "One nation, with liberty and justice for all." And that's what we're really dealing with, this question of justice and fairness. Our nation will not last unless we're fair to all our people and give all our people an equal opportunity. We may make some short-term gains, but when you have a major class division along lines of wealth—people on one side who have money, power and connection and those on the other who struggle to decide whether they're going to take a needed medicine or eat because drugs are so expensive—then you've got a serious issue. The thing that drives us at the Center, and me personally, is the individuals we help, like the Latino Katrina cleanup workers in New Orleans who were cheated out of their wages by a company that was gouging the federal government for millions. Not paying their employees the legal wage. Cheating them. Not giving promised food or housing. Our clients were literally starving while these corporations reaped millions in government grants. We sued and collected hundred of thousands of dollars for these poor hard-working migrants. That's the reward that we get.

JHS: *Do you see people's mindsets being changed in the context of that sort of lawsuit?*

DEES: Well, we don't file these lawsuits to change mindsets. We represent individuals, our clients. But I do think that we clearly do change people's minds. First of all, the people we file suit against are dealt with respectfully, given an opportunity to see what they've done wrong and settled if possible. Our goal is not to drag somebody into court and beat them to the ground. Hopefully, we educate the larger community—the judges and the lawyers on the other side especially. It's also important that we educate those whose rights are being violated. It empowers people. Nothing in this country is feared more by those who abuse power than a poor person with a lawyer.

JHS: *The Aryan Nations are gone from the Pacific Northwest. But what if bringing suit and bankrupting them just renewed their resolve? Some people suspect that they're carrying on their activities elsewhere with renewed fervor and a greater desire for vengeance.*

DEES: Here again, that's a rather shortsighted view. That would mean that we should just leave them right here and let them bring the Aryan brotherhood and racist ex-cons to Coeur d'Alene, and let them rob banks and kill people. "That's okay, we'd rather leave them here because if you try to stop them here, you'll just make them move somewhere else." That attitude shows a lack of knowledge about what's really going on.

The Aryan Nations today is a mere shadow of its former self. Our

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lawsuit bankrupted the group and took their property. Two guys and a post office box can form another group and call it the Aryan Nations, and that's about all they've done. They have a small group in Alabama and one in Pennsylvania. They may claim they're the Aryan Nations, but there's little left. We know everything they're doing. They might hold a so-called Aryan conference and you might have 100 nuts drop by during the weekend. We monitor these people closely. The so-called Aryan Nations today certainly bears watching, but there's nothing to it. When they tried to move to Pennsylvania, the people just laughed at them and the community rallied. The Aryan Nations isn't much of a threat in this country today. Clearly you can't cut their tongues out or give them frontal lobotomies to stop them from hating. They can set up another group. But if the new group encourages violence that results in people being hurt, then we can move against them. In America you have the right to hate, but you don't have the right to cross that line and hurt people.

