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Invisible Numbers

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Eight origami paper cranes hang from a shelf, each in a different color. The rainbow they form is mimicked all over the room - printed on postcards that hang from a bulletin board and created by solid colored folders lined up on a desk. A rainbow sticker pinned up on the wall reads, "I don't even THINK straight."
Jeff Sorensen can look out the windows of his office in 115 Durham Center at Parks Library and what used to be the free speech zone near the Hub. A pink and white “Safe Zone” sticker hangs on the front of Sorensen’s desk, a message to anyone who sits across from it that his office is an accepting place for all people. Down the hall in 127 Durham, a pile of mangled, defaced “Safe Zone” stickers sit on a shelf. Two letters in thin, black ink were added to most of the stickers, which now read “UnSafe Zone.” The words, “Get over it fruitcake” were written in the pink triangle at the center of one sticker.

127 Durham is now a student work area, but it was Sorensen’s office last year when he came to work on November 18, 2002. He found the words “Die Fag” scrawled in black spray paint on the outer walls of the building. His initial reaction was mixed. “There was a certain feeling of dread, of persecution and a little bit of fear. But I had more fear for my employees, who seemed like innocent bystanders. There was also a positive feeling of energy, of inspiration and sort of a sick, twisted sense of, ‘Wow, I’m still noted on this campus.’”

Sorensen once was active in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community but had been out of the “queer limelight” for some time when the vandalism occurred.

Sorensen, systems analyst for Academic Information Technologies, sits tall behind his desk. His broad shoulders are covered by a black polo shirt and a thick, metal hoop earring hangs from each ear. The vandalism never made him fear for his physical well-being, and it’s easy to see why. “I’m not your stereotypical little gay boy. I can take care of myself in that regard.”

The Student Services Building was also defaced that day with the words “Dean of Fags,” possibly directed at Dean of Students Pete Englin. In the coming months, two more derogatory slurs toward homosexuality turned up on campus. A member of Triangle Fraternity chalked the words “Fag House Sucks” on a sign outside Farm House Museum on February 7. “ISU Fag Rag” was found on a freestanding wall near the Iowa State Daily’s offices outside Hamilton Hall on March 6. “The Triangle Fraternity thing seemed like a similar incident, but it wasn’t on the same level or done in the same spirit,” Sorensen said. The vandalism to the Durham Center, the Student Services Building and Hamilton Hall was never traced to an individual or group.

You’d never know hate crimes occurred on campus by looking at DPS’ annual report, “Safety and You.” The report lists zeros across the board for hate crimes regarding race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and disability. Since the report was released in September, DPS has been criticized for not listing the vandalism. ISU Police Captain Gene Deisinger said ISU Police isn’t trying to cover up the incidents. The vandalism incidents can’t be listed as hate crimes because they don’t fall into the state of Iowa’s definition, which requires the incident to be directed at an individual.

Deisinger said although the victims of these crimes feel directly targeted, there is no way to prove the message was intended specifically for them. “I can understand Mr. Sorensen or any other LGBT person feeling targeted by the profane and abusive language that was contained in the vandalism. However, to date we’ve seen nothing that says it was targeted directly at any one person.” Sorensen would have to own the building or the vandalism would have had to occur directly to his personal property for the incident to be classified as a hate crime under Iowa law. A message aimed at his sexuality written on walls directly outside his office doesn’t pass the test.

Sorensen feels the vandalism outside his office was definitely a hate crime. To him, the key component in determining whether an act is a hate crime should be the intent behind the act. “The distinction comes when the act attacks more than an individual. It attacks a culture or group of people. When a crime against me causes fear in my community, that’s when it becomes a hate crime.” While he doesn’t want to see the definition altered to the point where every illegal act is a hate crime, he believes that some acts deserve the label and the perpetrators of hate crimes should be punished accordingly.

Deisinger admits the “Safety and You” report may not be an accurate representation of crime on the ISU campus. He thinks of it as “one relative measure of the safety of the university, not to be taken as the hard and fast truth. I look at it as stimulus for discussion. It would be great if it starts a dialogue about why many people don’t come forward to the police to report a hate crime.”

Now, more than a year after the “Die Fag” incident, Sorensen still wonders what kind of person would take the time and effort to communicate such a hateful message. His theory includes profiles of several types of people. There’s the internalized homophobic, who tries to battle his or her internal struggle by lashing out at someone else. There’s the fundamental religious person who thinks homosexuality is pure evil. There’s the bored college student looking for a thrill.

“Sometimes, people feel like they need to show how masculine and straight...
they are by attacking others," Sorenson said. "As being gay becomes more acceptable, those who are straight can sometimes feel challenged to prove they're straight."

If Sorensen could meet the vandal behind the "Die Fag" message, he wouldn't hate him or her. He'd take that person out for dinner or to shoot pool. He'd talk about anything but "queer topics." He'd make that person see he's a normal human being with the same triumphs and struggles the perpetrator of the crime experiences.

"I'm not just a fag. That's one tiny facet of the gem that is my life."

Mandy Berenguel and her cousin decorated the door of their dorm room in Knapp Hall with light blue contact paper and pictures of family and friends. When Berenguel came home from class one day during the spring semester of her freshman year, she plowed right through the door and threw her backpack down on the floor. Her cousin looked up with fear in her eyes.

"Mandy, did you see what was on the door?" she asked.

Four swastikas covered part of the contact paper. Each was drawn in a different size and the word "Nazi" was written nearby. Since Berenguel and her roommate were two of only four nonwhite residents on the floor, she wondered if the drawings were a random attack or a targeted one.

Berenguel's cousin started coloring over the swastikas to hide them as Berenguel began to cry. "To her, it was solving the problem, but to me it wasn't enough. Physically, the drawings were still there under the pictures we drew over the top of them." Berenguel told the resident assistant on her floor about the drawings, but the RA told her since it was almost impossible to trace the incident, nothing could be done about it. Neither Berenguel nor her RA ever reported the incident to DPS officials or the ISUPD. Despite the support of others living on her floor, Berenguel never felt comfortable living in the dorms after that.

Berenguel's large brown eyes narrow with frustration when she talks about the ignorance she sees in many ISU students. She is half Mexican, half Filipino, petite with dark skin and dark hair pulled up into a messy bun. In a hooded sweatshirt and pink cotton sweatpants, she leans forward and speaks intently. "The university
Berenguel and other minority students already feel out of place in a student population of 83 percent Caucasians. When hate crimes occur, it only makes things worse. “When these students come to Iowa State, it’s a huge culture shock for them,” Berenguel said. “You can offer all the support you want, but it’s still really hard for them to see past how white this campus is.”

If Berenguel’s door were defaced today, she’d respond differently. “I wouldn’t have raised hell, but I would have made it a bigger deal. When people like me continue not to say anything about it, people think it doesn’t happen.”

The ISU community responded to the vandalism on the Durham Center and Student Services Building with an outcry for discussion. A steady stream of letters to the editor were published in the Iowa State Daily and panel discussions were held to address homophobia and intolerance on campus. The open dialogue that occurred through these activities transformed hate crimes into a tool for educating others about homophobia. The support Sorensen received from his co-workers and the ISU community renewed his confidence in the university’s ability to move forward and make progress toward a more accepting campus. The person or group who painted those two short words outside Sorensen’s office didn’t achieve the fear they hoped to evoke. “Their intent was obviously negative, but the long-term result was positive.”

The string of vandalism also didn’t slow down a process of increasing acceptance for homosexuality that started on the ISU campus in the early 1990s. Sorensen can remember when LGBTAA meetings were held in a secret location. Those who wanted to attend were prescreened and had to meet a member at a neutral location to be brought to the meeting place. He can also remember when creating a specialty seat to represent the LGBT community on the Government of the Student Body’s senate failed while specialty seats were created for nontraditional, international and American-ethnic minority students and for students with disabilities.

But he’s also seen university health care benefits and use of university facilities extended to same sex partners. “There’s pretty much nothing a same sex couple can’t get that a married couple can, university-wise.”

“You can offer all the support you want, but it’s still really hard for them to see past how white this campus is.”

These hate crime cases will remain open indefinitely unless a new lead comes in or a suspect is reported to ISU Police. Deisinger hasn’t given up hoping a new development will surface. “If next week or next month a tip comes in that would allow me to hold someone accountable for these crimes, I would wholeheartedly do that.”

DPS reports won’t tell you hate crimes occur on the ISU campus, but the people who’ve been victimized by them will. They hope the people behind these cowardly acts will one day be caught. More importantly, they hope if they tell their stories, the next person who finds a hateful message on his or her door or office will go straight to the police and report it.