PORTLAND

THEY PUNCH WHITE SUPREMACISTS. ARE THEY ALSO HELPING TRUMP?

BY KATIE SHEPHERD
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Portland was supposed to be a peaceful escape for Tim Ledwith.

He came to the West Coast fleeing his hometown of Boston—a city where he says he suffered childhood sexual abuse, spent time in juvenile detention for attacking a classmate with a wrench, and where he lived when his uncle was murdered by a white supremacist.

He wanted to be a standup comedian. But Ledwith, 35, carried his strong aversion for bigots across the country with him.

“I’ve always hated Nazis,” he says. “I’ve had Nazis in my life that have done fucking bad things.”

That’s why, after the 2016 election, when far-right brawlers began to use Portland as a playground for beat-downs, Ledwith started suiting up in a black tracksuit and a cheap black bandanna.

He’s an antifascist. Antifa. And he fights.

On June 4, 2017, he snuck behind enemy lines at a protest and laughed in the face of a Proud Boy. The right-wing crowd landed a few blows before federal police tackled Ledwith and escorted him away.

“Fuck you, Nazis,” he screamed in his thick Boston accent on newsreels played on a loop for national audiences.

Now, for the first time, Ledwith is willing to talk about what he does on the streets—and why he does it.

“I’ve been involved in a lot of violence,” he says. “And anyone that romanticizes violence? He is either a sociopath if he’s done it, or he hasn’t actually done it.”

Ledwith says local and national critics of the antifascist movement are off base.
“I have absolutely no problem with people defending themselves,” Ledwith says. “I’m also not opposed to being proactive with violence, to be honest with you. I feel like it’s a trap to think, ‘OK, don’t be as bad, don’t sink to their level.’ I think it’s kind of bullshit. The problem is that the violence on their side is exponentially more than ours.”

Ledwith is an unusual antifascist. He’s willing to identify himself publicly, while most of his comrades remain resolutely anonymous. But he’s grappling with a question that Portland’s antifa increasingly faces.

When Portland antifa physically confront white supremacists in Portland’s streets, are they helping Donald Trump and the far right?

The debate over protest tactics looms large as the city prepares for far-right extremists to fill the waterfront on Aug. 17, in a rally inspired by calls to designate antifa as a terrorist organization.

A lot of Portlanders agree with Ledwith’s politics: In a city bluer than Marge Simpson’s hair, there’s very little support for Trump’s minions and a lot of hatred for their racist views.

But Ledwith is at the center of a ritual many Portlanders are weary of watching. For nearly three years, all summer and through the fall, hundreds of citizens dressed in black have flooded downtown to clash with men in red “Make America Great Again” caps.

The right-wing brawlers come to town looking for a fight. Antifa gives it to them—and, according to some, plays right into the hands of the MAGA crowd.

Randy Blazak, a sociology professor at Portland State University, is Oregon’s leading expert on far-right extremism. He’s sympathetic to antifa’s goals but warns that their methods may end up pushing the American public further to the right.

“Even Noam Chomsky thinks antifa is a gift to the right,” says Blazak. “They’re being used by the right to feed the narrative about the violent left. Every time they throw a punch becomes a meme.”

With antifa under greater scrutiny than ever before, WW sat down with a half-dozen Portland antifa in the past two weeks. None of them wore a mask. They used their real names. And they passionately defended their tactics and their movement—one that many people wish would go away.

Last month, President Trump tweeted that he was considering designating antifa a “domestic terrorist organization.” U.S. Sens. Ted Cruz (R-Texas) and Bill Cassidy (R-La.) have introduced a congressional resolution calling for the same thing.

That’s because in June, several people in masks attacked a local conservative videographer named Andy Ngo.

Ngo has spent two years filming antifa behaving badly in Portland and selling the footage to national television networks. On June 29, several demonstrators threw milkshakes and eggs at Ngo, and two masked protesters...
threw punches and landed a kick to his gut. It’s hard to
know who really hit him, because everybody in the crowd
was masked and anonymous.
In a July speech, Trump called Ngo “a single man
standing there with a camera who never got hit and never
hit back before in his life.”
Trump and Fox News have made antifa into boogey-
men. In the wake of an Aug. 3 mass shooting carried out
by a white supremacist targeting Latinos in El Paso, right-
wing conspiracy theorists suggested within hours that
the attack had been carried out by antifa, or that antifa
would raid the city in response. In the hours following the
tragedy, Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick spoke to Fox News,
warning antifa to “stay out.” (The rumor that antifascists
planned to “converge” on El Paso was spread by Ngo on
social media.)
Closer to home, Portland Police Chief Danielle Outlaw
wants to take protesters’ masks off. After the June 29
protest, Outlaw proposed a change in the law that would
discourage demonstrators from covering their faces with
bandannas or ski masks.
“If you knew you could be easily identified, do you
think you would be as inclined to commit that act of
violence or commit that crime?” she asked at a press
conference last month.
But under those masks are a surprising array of
individuals. Antifascists can range from volatile college
students to mustachioed grandpas.
Gregory Samson retired as a sculptor’s assistant about 10 years ago. Now, he spends his days caring for his bedridden mother.

Samson, 65, lives in Southeast Portland. The soft-spoken Asian American—Japanese on his mother’s side, Filipino on his father’s—was born and raised in Portland. Most days, he plays acoustic guitar and advocates for responsible gun ownership as a member of the Socialist Rifle Association.

But that still leaves him some free time. Four or five times a year, when he hears right-wing protesters are in town, Samson dons a black T-shirt, black pants and a black bandanna over his face and heads to a protest. He spends the next several hours chanting, “Go home, Nazis!” and sometimes standing toe to toe with riot police.

“I’ve been an antifascist all my life,” he says, “as long as I’ve known what fascism is.”

Samson says he learned during high school that his mother and her family were forced into Japanese American internment camps during World War II. After Donald Trump won the presidency, he started to see echoes of that story. In January 2017, Samson attended his first protest alongside many other masked antifascists.

Samson says he’s prepared to defend himself, but usually he stands several rows back in the black bloc crowd, offering support in numbers.

“As soon as the Patriot Prayer and Proud Boys show up with their followers, then it gets a little heated,” he says. “And then, when the police in full-out military gear show up, it gets hot.”

He thinks critics like Blazak are wrong.

“I don’t want fascism in our country,” he says. “We are going down that route and we need to stop it. I worry about my grandkids.”

He says his wife and his friends tire of hearing his political rants. But he says he’s proud that his daughter, a teacher, publicly calls herself an activist.

He says he fears the intensity of political disagreements in America right now.

“There’s so much hate in this country,” he says. “I doubt there will be a revolutionary war, but it’s going to take years for politics to get to be decent again.”

When antifa gathers to square off with racists, Effie Baum hands out milkshakes.

Red-haired and fast-talking, Baum, a 30-something, now works in health care after attending art school and working in the music industry for years. (Baum declined to be photographed.)

On June 29, Baum wore a party dress and a petticoat, and covered their face with a hot pink bandanna. (Baum prefers to be referred to by the pronouns “they” and “them.”) They carried a backpack filled with water, snacks, sunscreen, first-aid supplies and spare bandannas.

When they’re not at a protest, Baum frequents the local music scene. As a punk-loving teen in Seattle, Baum worked for a radio station and booked bands to play at local music venues. The punk music scene introduced them to anti-racist
RED ARMY: IN MAY 2017, ANTIFA DEMONSTRATORS IN BLACK BLOC LIT FIRES AND TOPPLED NEWSSTANDS NEAR PIONEER PLACE MALL. ON AUG. 4, 2018, ANTIFASCISTS RETURNED TO THE STREETS WEARING ARMOR WITH SOVIET-INSPIRED INSIGNIA.
organizing. Baum’s first protest was the 1999 World Trade Organization protests, which they attended while in high school.

Baum says antifa wants to drive hate groups out of Portland.

“Our goal is to, basically, increase the cost of participation,” Baum says. “So they stop showing up.”

Baum is the spokesperson for Popular Mobilization, or Pop Mob, a group that coordinates large antifascist demonstrations. There are a lot of people to coordinate.

Pop Mob’s first-ever rally was Aug. 4, 2018. It attracted attendees like the Portland Democratic Socialists of America, a group dressed as clowns, servers manning a refreshments table with a banner declaring it “snack bloc,” a marching band, and the hardliners—Rose City Antifa (see sidebar, right).

One reason national calls to designate antifa a domestic terrorist organization sound puzzling to many Portland activists is because there’s little organization among antifascists. Antifa is better described as a movement than a group.

“We have a really clear set of politics,” Baum says. “We want a world where everybody is safe, where people don’t have to be afraid that they’re going to get beat up just for simply being who they are, or the color of their skin, or who they choose to love, or what borders that arbitrarily they were born within.”

Organizers meet up shortly after dawn. They have to pick up the PA system, rental cars, food, water and medic supplies before the event. Sometimes, they have to move locations at the last minute because police have put up barriers or roped off parts of a park to keep the antifascists out. At the most recent rally, Pop Mob set up a U-Haul truck with a loudspeaker and played dance jams for the event’s “queer dance party” theme. Then they handed out hundreds of coconut milkshakes.

“It’s satisfying to see that work pay off,” Baum says.

Despite the negative press and violence, Baum says antifa’s tactics are working. As evidence, they point to the dwindling crowds Patriot Prayer and Proud Boys draw to Portland.

“Honestly, it has been, in my opinion, successful,” Baum says. “If you look at the numbers that they brought in for their last few actions, it is a far cry from what they were drawing even a year ago.”

You don’t have to be a Republican, however, to see the damage antifa is inflicting on its potential allies in the mainstream left.

Portland antifascists have handed Donald Trump his 2020 campaign ree. One of the faces in that ree will be Luis Marquez. He’ll be cursing.

Sometimes masked, sometimes not, Marquez, 47, has been filmed yelling “Bastards!” at cops. He calls officers of color “race traitors.” Portland police have arrested Marquez several times for harassment, disorderly conduct and theft for snatching a far-right supporter’s “Make America Great Again” hat and sunglasses.

At the front lines of the Occupy ICE camp that last June lined the building where federal immigration agents work in Portland, Marquez paced down a line of federal police.

“We’re here at the ICE facility, fresh out of jail,” he said to an audience watching him live-stream on Facebook. He panned to a close-up on a uniformed woman’s face, who he said was Latina.

“That’s a traitor cop right there,” he says in the video. “That’s what an Uncle Tom looks like.” He then speculated about what racial slurs her fellow officers might use to describe her.

He behaves so badly his fellow antifascists jokingly call Marquez an “agent provocateur”—because his ugly social media videos and bad press might as well have been purposely cooked up by the right to sabotage the left.

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Little Red Handbook

A glossary of antifascist terms.

ANTIFA

A contraction of “antifascist,” antifa is shorthand for a loose collection of people who share a strong opposition to fascism. They rally against far-right extremists or publicly expose individuals with white supremacist or otherwise bigoted views.

ROSE CITY ANTIFA

Founded in 2007, Rose City Antifa is a secretive group of antifascist organizers most well-known for “doxxing” Nazis. The group is rigidly anonymous, citing the risk of retaliation for exposing violent people.

DOXXING

Posting personal information like telephone numbers and employers, in an effort to get people fired or ostracized for their political statements.

POP MOB

Short for Popular Mobilization, Pop Mob is a Portland antifascist group that emerged after a June 30, 2018, Patriot Prayer rally turned into one of the worst riots the city had seen in years. The group helps connect antifascist organizers from groups like the Democratic Socialists of America and labor and immigrant advocates.

BLACK BLOC

A protest tactic in which demonstrators conceal their identities with masks or bandannas and wear all-black clothing. The tactic makes it more difficult for police or others to identify protesters. Antifascists frequently employ the tactic in Portland, but black bloc has been used by other protest movements, including anarchists, Black Lives Matter protesters, and even far-right groups.

COMMUNITY DEFENSE

Physical opposition to the presence of far-right groups. Many antifascists believe racist and neo-Nazi rallies are inherently violent because genocide and hate are their core principles. Antifascists say physical opposition is necessary to stop racists from intimidating or harming people who would otherwise be targets.

SHARPs

SHARP stands for “skinheads against racial prejudice,” a militant, anti-racist movement that emerged in the U.S. punk-rock scene in the late 1980s. Members of the group physically confronted racist skinheads, sometimes violently, long before the 2016 election. In Portland, the movement emerged in response to the white supremacist killing of Ethiopian immigrant Mulugeta Seraw in 1988. SHARPs are some of the earliest Portland antifascists—you can’t trace a simple line from them to Pop Mob, but they’re part of the same tradition here. KATIE SHEPHERDS.
The troublemaker: Because of his inflammatory rhetoric, the far right has declared Luis Marquez (left and bottom right) an Antifa leader, but he doesn’t formally belong to any organized groups at antifascist demonstrations in Portland.

and sometimes wrote jokes for other standup comics. Marquez says the political moment compelled him to start taunting and screaming at right-wingers instead.

“This government has never given anything because people have asked kindly,” he says. “If we don’t do something quick, we’re going to see these concentration camps turned into death camps.”

Some of Marquez’s allies dislike how he conducts himself at protests. “He’s the most controversial person within the left,” says his close friend Jacob Bureros, who helped organize a blockade of federal immigration offices last summer.

Marquez brushes off the criticisms. “Are we trying to be free and equal,” he asks, “or are we trying to play to a group that is trying to keep us down and quiet?”

Marquez recently moved his three children and his partner out of their home in Southeast Portland because of death threats. They’re now living near the woods, where Stanislav Vysotsky, who studies fascist and antifascist movements, “When that’s the narrative—that Antifa is coming for you, that little old ladies doing their grocery shopping are going to get mobbed by Antifa—then you’re going to mobilize some segment of the population that already feels under threat because of demographic changes.”

Professor Ruth Ben-Ghiat, who studies fascism at New York University, says instances of violence against fascists get used by authoritarian leaders as propaganda. She says that’s what Trump did.

“The effect of this is to try to make his followers believe that all Democrats are radical,” she says. “Any violence that happens at an antifascist rally can backfire.”

Ben-Ghiat says large, nonviolent protests would be more effective. “Trump is very concerned about his image and optics, if people were out in the millions weekend...
after weekend, that would have an impact,” she says.

PSU’s Blazak says antifascists may be engaged in empty theatrics while avoiding confrontations with truly dangerous white supremacists.

“Fascism isn’t going to happen because Joey Gibson [of Patriot Prayer] is marching through Portland,” Blazak says. “We have fascists in Portland—the Gypsy Jokers, Brood and the European Kindred. Those people are fascists and are killing people. Antifa doesn’t show up at their headquarters. That’s too serious of a battle.”

Confronted with the question of whether their tactics do more harm than good, antifascists mostly hold their ranks.

“We don’t play good protester, bad protester,” Baum says. “We’re all on the same side. We’re [confronting] people that are literally advocating for genocide, that violently engage in attacks on vulnerable and marginalized populations. People will split hairs about who threw the first punch, but the fact of the matter is, their presence is violence before anything happens.”

Local politicians have begged: If leftists stayed home, the brawls wouldn’t happen.

Take last month—when a batch of far-right protesters surrounded Mayor Ted Wheeler’s home. Antifascists said the mayor wasn’t worth “protecting.” So the MAGA hats stood in the sun for an hour, then went home. They looked ridiculous. They received no national attention and very little local notice.

Baum and the antifascists organized by Pop Mob will return Aug. 17 to face off with a crowd organized by a Florida far-right radio host who demands lawmakers “end domestic terrorism”—that is, outlaw antifa.

Baum scoffs at the suggestion antifascists should stay home.

“It’s a really convenient argument they can make, but it doesn’t hold water,” they say. “There’s this entire ‘anti-antifa’ movement, but that’s a double negative. If you’re anti-antifa, you’re basically saying you’re a fascist.”

Tim Ledwith didn’t plan to go public. But then he was attacked, far from a protest, outside a Buffalo Wild Wings.

Three Proud Boys drove past Ledwith on June 8, 2018, on Northeast Broadway. They were shouting about Trump from a black pickup truck. Ledwith taunted the men about a spat at a past protest.

The truck suddenly stopped. Two of the men, Tusitala “Tiny” Toese and Donovon Flippo, got out of the truck. Toese punched Ledwith in the face, splitting his lip. Ledwith then did something unusual: He reported the assault to police.

Ledwith says going to the cops was not an easy choice. He served time in juvenile detention, doesn’t support incarceration, and deeply distrusts law enforcement agencies. His negative feelings were exacerbated when police failed to follow up with witnesses and his case stalled for nearly a year.

But he says a similar alleged attack by Toese and Flippo on a black teenager in Vancouver, Wash., pushed him to keep pursuing criminal charges against the Proud Boys.

“I don’t fault somebody for not wanting to go to police,” Ledwith says. “Even though my working with the police or DA seems like it worked, and to some degree I think it did, it’s a special case.”

After charges were brought in Ledwith’s case, Toese left Oregon for his hometown in American Samoa and Flippo took a plea deal that bars him from protests for one year.

Antifascists say more incidents like that daytime assault could happen if they don’t confront fascists in the street. But few antifascists have done what Ledwith did by going to the cops.

Despite going public with his identity and being tar-
geted by far-right extremists, Ledwith hasn’t shied from protests. He says he doesn’t want to let the Proud Boys win by scaring him away.

On May 1, Ledwith marched—unmasked—with immigration activists outside the federal building where U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement works in Portland. Joey Gibson and several other Patriot Prayer and Proud Boy supporters showed up, trying to provoke the left-leaning protesters into an on-camera fight.

One member of the far-right provocateur ensemble was Russell Schultz, a Proud Boy who played getaway driver last year when Toese and Flippo assaulted Ledwith. Ledwith screamed insults at the far-right crew in front of the federal building.

But Schultz kept a careful distance, perhaps because his friends faced felony assault charges for attacking Ledwith.

Ledwith’s experiences with violence have led him to contemplate whether his energy—and the energy of other antifascists—could be better spent in other ways.

“If I were able to just jump out of this booth right now and then kick a Nazi in the head—I’m smiling in my mind right now,” he says, drinking a margarita in a Brooklyn bar. “That’d be pretty cool. But the actual feeling of doing it doesn’t feel good. It physically doesn’t feel good. Violence is gross.”

Because antifa isn’t an organization that polices its members, it can attract foolish people. Not all antifascist protesters agree with one another on tactics or even politics.

“Anybody can put on a balaclava and do anything,” he says. “There’s a lot of young people, people who kind of get wrapped up in the crowd. The tactics they use aren’t as beneficial.”

Ledwith says the clashes on the street are not the best work antifascists can do. He points to groups like Life After Hate, a nonprofit that helps fascists leave white supremacist groups, as an example of an unspoken part of the antifascist movement that could play a bigger role in fighting the growth of fascism by reforming former bigots.

Lately, Ledwith has started to wonder whether his energy would be better spent off the street. Instead of trying to punch Nazis, he says antifascists could do more to stamp out fascism by trying to reform them.

“I think that is a longer goal, which I really, really, really like,” Ledwith says. “We should be providing alternatives to people that have fallen into fascism. Because there’s reasons why people fall into that. It’s not to excuse them. But get them out.”

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