Reformed Skinhead Endures Agony To Remove Tattoos

Helen O'Neill

This combination of eight photos provided by Bill Brummel Productions shows the progress skinhead Bryon Widner.

Julie Widner was terrified — afraid her husband would do something reckless, even disfigure himself.

"We had come so far," she says. "We had left the movement, had created a good family life. We had so much to live for. I just thought there has to be someone out there who will help us."

After getting married in 2006, the couple, former pillars of the white power movement (she as a member of the National Alliance, he a founder of the Vinlanders gang of skinheads) had worked hard to put their racist past behind them. They had settled down and had a baby; her younger children had embraced him as

a father.

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EDITOR'S NOTE — A reformed skinhead, Bryon Widner was desperate to rid himself of the racist tattoos that covered his face — so desperate that he turned to former enemies for help, and was willing to endure months of pain. Second of two parts.

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And yet, the past was ever-present — tattooed in brutish symbols all over his body and face: a blood-soaked razor, swastikas, the letters "HATE" stamped across his knuckles.

Wherever he turned Widner was shunned — on job sites, in stores and restaurants. People saw a menacing thug, not a loving father. He felt like an utter failure.

The couple had scoured the Internet trying to learn how to safely remove the facial tattoos. But extensive facial tattoos are extremely rare, and few doctors have performed such complicated surgery. Besides, they couldn't afford it. They had little money and no health insurance.

So Widner began investigating homemade recipes, looking at dermal acids and other solutions. He reached the point, he said, where "I was totally prepared to douse my face in acid."

In desperation, Julie did something that once would have been unimaginable. She reached out to a black man whom white supremacists consider their sworn enemy.

Daryle Lamont Jenkins runs an anti-hate group called One People's Project based in Philadelphia. The 43-year-old activist is a huge thorn in the side of white supremacists, posting their names and addresses on his website, alerting people to their rallies and organizing counter protests.

In Julie he heard the voice of a woman in trouble.

"It didn't matter who she had once been or what she had once believed," he said. "Here was a wife and mother prepared to do anything for her family."

Jenkins suggested that Widner contact T.J. Leyden, a former neo-Nazi skinhead Marine who had famously left the movement in 1996, and has promoted tolerance ever since. More than anyone else, Leyden understood the revulsion and self-condemnation that Widner was going through. And the danger.

"Hide in plain sight," he advised. "Lean on those you trust."

Most importantly, Leyden told him to call the Southern Poverty Law Center.

"If anyone can help," he said, "it's those guys."

When Widner called, says Joseph Roy, "it was like the Osama Bin Laden of the movement calling in."

Roy is chief investigator of hate and extreme groups for the SPLC. The nonprofit civil rights organization, based in Montgomery, Ala., tracks hate groups, militias and extreme organizations. Aggressive at bringing lawsuits, it has successfully shut down leading white power groups, bankrupted their leaders and won multimillion dollar awards for victims.

The SPLC hears regularly from people who say they are trying to leave hate and extreme groups. Some are fakes. Some are trying to spread false intelligence. Many are in crisis, and return to the group when the crisis passes.

"Very rarely have we met a reformed racist skinhead," says Roy.

Over the years, Roy had dubbed Widner the "pit bull" of skinheads. "No one was more aggressive, more confrontational, more notorious," Roy said.

And yet, over several weeks of conversations with Bryon and Julie, he became convinced. There was something different about this couple — a sincerity, a raw determination to put the past behind them and to seek some sort of redemption.

In March 2007 Roy and an assistant flew to Michigan. Roy still marvels at the memory of the guy with the freakish face walking out to greet them, wearing a "World's Greatest Dad" sweat shirt, holding his baby boy in one arm while a little girl clung to his other one.

Over the next few days they got to see the suffering Bryon was going through. They listened in horror when he told them he was considering using acid on his face. "He was in a bad place," Roy said. "This was a guy who was fighting for his life."

Widner shared information about the structure of various skinhead groups, the different forms of probation in some gangs, the hierarchy of others. He agreed to speak at the SPLC's annual Skinhead Intelligence Network conference, which draws police from all over the country.

For his part, Roy promised to ask his organization to do something it had never done before — search for a donor to pay for Widner's tattoos to be surgically removed. Widner didn't hold out much hope. But for now, he agreed not to experiment with acid.

Financially and emotionally, things were getting tougher. Widner found part-time work shoveling snow and odd handyman jobs, but barely enough to support a family. The vicious postings on the Internet continued. Pig manure was dumped on their cars. There were hang-up calls in the middle of the night. Anonymous callers left threatening messages: "You will die." Several times, tipped off by sympathetic friends that a crew was on the way to "take care" of them, the family fled to a hotel.

So when Roy called a couple of months later saying a donor was willing to pay for the surgery, Widner could hardly believe it. The donor, a longtime supporter of the SPLC had been moved by Widner's story — and shocked by photographs of his face.

"For him to have any chance in life and do good," she said, "I knew those tattoos had to come off."

She agreed to fund the surgeries — at a cost of approximately $35,000 — on several conditions. She wanted to remain anonymous. She wanted assurances that Bryon would get his GED, would go into counseling and would pursue either a college education or a trade.

It was easy to agree. These were all things Widner wanted to do.

It would take up to a year to find the right doctors and schedule the operations. Meanwhile, it was clear the family had to leave Michigan. The white power Web forums were wild with chatter about the race traitor couple and their family. Through local police, the FBI warned that they were in danger.

In the spring of 2008 they packed their belongings and moved to Tennessee, near Julie's father. They rented a three-bedroom house in the country, joined a church. Helped by his father-in-law and his pastor, Widner found some work. The threats subsided.

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Dr. Bruce Shack, who chairs the Department of Plastic Surgery at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville, vividly remembers the first time he met Widner. After seeing photographs and talking to the SPLC, he had agreed to do the surgery. But he was totally unprepared for Widner's face.

"This wasn't just a few tattoos," he said. "This was an entire canvas."

It was June 2009 and the couple had driven to Vanderbilt to meet him. Shack's genial manner immediately put them at ease.

"He didn't just see the tattoos," Widner says. "He saw me as a real human being."

Shack also saw one of the biggest challenges of his career.

Shack showed Widner the laser — which looks like a long, fat pen — that would trace the exact outline of the tattoos as it burned them off his face. He explained how it would deliver short bursts of energy, different amounts depending on the color and depth of the tattoo. It would take many sessions for the ink to fade. And it would be painful, far more painful than getting the tattoos in the first place.

"You are going to feel like you have the worst sunburn in the world, your face will swell up like a prizefighter, but it will eventually heal," Shack told Widner. "This is not going to be any fun. But if you are willing to do it, I'm willing to help."

Widner didn't hesitate. "I have to do it," he said, as Julie held his hand. "I am never going to live a normal life unless I do."

On June 22, 2009, Widner lay on an operating table, his mind spinning with anxiety and hope. A nurse dabbed numbing gel all over his face. Shack towered over him in protective goggles and injected a local anesthetic. Then he started jabbing Widner's skin, the laser making a staccato rat-tat-tat sound as it burned through his flesh.

Widner had never felt such pain. Not all the times he had suffered black eyes and lost teeth in bar brawls, not the time in jail when guards — for fun — locked him up with a group of black inmates in order to see him taken down. His face swelled up in a burning rage, his eyes were black and puffy, his hands looked like blistered boxing gloves. He had never felt so helpless or so miserable.

"I was real whiny during that time," he says.

"He was real brave," says Julie.

After a couple of sessions, Shack decided that Widner was in too much pain: The only way to continue was to put him under general anesthetic for every operation. It was also clear that the removal was going to take far longer than the seven or eight sessions he had originally anticipated.

They developed a routine. Every few weeks, Widner would spend about an hour and a half in surgery and another hour in recovery, while Julie would fuss and fret and try to summon the strength to hide her fears and smile at the bruised, battered husband she drove home. It would often take days for the burns and oozing blisters to subside.

Shack and his team marveled at Widner's determination and endurance. The Widners marveled at the team's level of commitment and care. Even nurses who were initially intimidated by Widner's looks found themselves growing fond of the stubborn former skinhead and his young family.

Slowly — far more slowly than Widner had hoped — the tattoos began to fade. In all he underwent 25 surgeries over the course of 16 months, on his face, neck and hands.

On Oct. 22, 2010, the day of the final operation, Shack hugged Julie and shook hands with Bryon. Removing the tattoos, he said, had been one of his greatest honors as a surgeon. But a greater privilege was getting to know them.

"Anyone who is prepared to put himself through this is bound to do something good with his life," Shack said.

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In a comfortable yard in a tidy suburban subdivision, Bryon and Julie Widner smoke Marlboros and sip energy drinks as they contemplate the newest chapter in their lives. Only a few trusted friends and family members know where they live — they

agreed to be interviewed on condition that the location of their new home not be disclosed.

This time, they moved because they had deliberately exposed themselves to danger. After much consideration, the couple had agreed to allow an MSNBC film crew to follow Widner through his surgeries. The cameras didn't spare the details, capturing Widner writhing and moaning in agony. Widner didn't care. If anything he felt that he deserved the pain and the public humiliation as a kind of penance for all the hurt he had caused over the years.

But there was a deeper motivation for going public with his story. There was a chance that some angry young teenager on the verge of becoming a skinhead would see Widner's suffering and think twice.

Maybe he would realize that, as Widner says now, "I wasn't on any great mission for the white race. I was just a thug."

They moved the day after the documentary — "Erasing Hate" — aired in June.

Widner's arms and torso are still extensively tattooed. He is in the process of inking over the "political" ones, like the Nazi lightning bolts. His face is clean and scar free, and he has a shock of thick black hair. With his thin glasses and studious expression, he looks nerdy, Julie jokes.

His neck and hands have suffered some pigment damage, he gets frequent migraine headaches and he has to stay out of the sun. But, he says, "it's a small price to pay for being human again."

The move took a financial toll. Julie had to pawn her wedding ring to buy groceries and pay the rent. But Widner has found some work — construction and tattoo jobs. He got his GED and they both plan to start courses at the local community college.

They say they feel safe. Several police officers and firefighters live nearby; the FBI has visited and the local police know their story.

Still they can't help but worry. It's one thing getting out of the white power movement as others have done, fading into obscurity. It's another to publicly denounce the violent world they once inhabited.

Bryon has constant nightmares about what injuries he might have inflicted — injuries he can only imagine because so often he was in a drunken stupor when he beat someone up. Did he blind someone? Did he paralyze someone? He doesn't know.

But there are moments of grace. After a recent screening of the documentary in California, a black woman embraced Widner in tears. "I forgive you," she cried.

They've thrown out everything to do with their racist past, including photographs of Widner and his crew posing at Nordic fests and of the white power conferences Julie

used to attend. And yet there are reminders all around, and not just the remaining tattoos. Tyrson's name — inspired by the Norse god of justice, Tyr — troubles them for its connection to the racist brand of Odinism his father practiced with the Vinlanders. But how do they ask a 4-year-old to change his name to Eddie?

The child tugs at his daddy's Spiderman T-shirt, begging him to come play video games. "OK, buddy," Widner says. "Let's go shoot a few bad guys." With that, the man who once brandished his hate like a badge of honor scoops up his son and turns on his Xbox.

Widner plays the role of Captain America. The bad guys are Nazis.

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