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'The stupidest thing I've ever read in my life'

Community members troubled by vandalism at State School promoting racial hate groups

By **JON DECKER**
THE LACONIA DAILY SUN

LACONIA — The Laconia Police Department is investigating white nationalist graffiti, this time at the State School property.

Last summer, groundskeeper Tristan Chase began documenting instances of the graffiti throughout the abandoned complex before painting over them.

"I thought it was just young kids trying to upset people at first, but it kept happening and

happening," Chase said. "So I guess it is more serious than I thought."

Graffiti at the property is far from an anomaly, but this is the first time Chase has seen this level of hateful tagging. The tags he photographed include white supremacist symbols, such as the swastika, a modified Celtic cross, a neo-Pagan symbol known as a "life rune," and SS lightning bolts, the symbol of Nazi Germany's notorious elite military unit.

A tag still visible at the property reads "white youth in revolt."

"Some of it's really ignorant," Chase said. "There's one that said 'fascism is freedom,' and that's the stupidest thing I've ever read in my life."

Chase went on to say that there was just "no place" for that type of rhetoric in the world.

The photos caught the eye of Lois Kessin of Laconia, who has raised concerns about antisemitic and white supremacist graffiti previously found in the city.

Kessin, who is Jewish, was outraged by the photographs and contacted the police and The Daily Sun.

"The racism in it too is just horrible. It's not surprisingly antisemitic in the sense of 'kill all the Jews,' it was mostly



ABOVE: Community member and activist Lois Kessin stands beside a piece of neo-Nazi graffiti discovered at the State School. The tag features a Celtic cross and the words "white youth in revolt." Other white supremacist symbols, including swastikas and S.S. bolts, have also been found. (Jon Decker/The Laconia Daily Sun photo) LEFT: An example of messaging defacing a building on the State School property. (Tristan Chase/Courtesy photo)

about [Black people], and that's outrageous," Kessin said. "It's still Nazi symbols and we know what they stand for."

Kessin said she didn't want the tags to be written off as youthful stupidity.

"If you look at those photos, there are four or five very sophisticated Nazi symbols," Kessin said. "You had to know something to use different symbols. I don't think you can toss it off as 14-year-old kids being stupid.

Even if it is, it's not acceptable in our city."

Kessin brought the images to David Stamps, chair of the Laconia Human Relations Committee.

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“It’s difficult, because on the one hand, I wonder if it’s just another form of ‘owning the libs,’ throwing chum into the water and getting people stirred up,” Stamps said. “On the other hand, it’s extremely hurtful to many people given the various symbols and words being used, which is one reason I stepped forward to support Lois when she sent those images to me.”

Stamps contacted the Attorney General’s Office about the tags. Assistant Attorney General Sean Locke responded.

“As the Attorney General has said, ‘This type of hateful and threatening criminal activity, motivated by racial or religious intolerance, particularly at places of worship, has no place in New Hampshire and will not be tolerated,’” Locke wrote. “Thank you again for bringing this to our attention.”

At least one of the State School tags featured the phrase “NSC 131,” the name of a New England-based white supremacist movement. NSC stands for National Socialist Club.

According to the Anti-Defamation League, the “131” in NSC 131 is an alphanumeric code representing ACA, which stands for anti-communism and anti-capitalism. Several months ago, a recently painted-over NSC 131 tag was visible on top the city’s parking garage. Calls to the city manager’s office about the graffiti were not returned.

“I looked [NSC 131] up and I’m watching

videos, and I’m like, ‘OK, they’re young and dumb,’” Chase said. “It’s the kind of stuff that I thought was gone.”

NSC 131 is known for posting videos of themselves crashing events like drag shows in Massachusetts. Members tend to show up in large groups clad in black sunglasses, masks, hats and hoodies emblazoned with the group’s logo. At times, they attempt to provoke fights with counter-protesters by hurling insults, slurs and posturing, before fleeing in rented vans. The group allegedly has chapters in Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut.

The group and its founder, Christopher Hood, are facing a civil rights lawsuit from the state of New Hampshire for hanging a banner that said “Keep New England white” over an overpass in Portsmouth last year. As of March 1, Hood says the group has failed to find a single New Hampshire attorney who will represent them.

NSC 131 shares links to extreme organizations. Hood has previous affiliations with the neo-fascist group Patriot Front, the Proud Boys and the Base, a militant survivalist white supremacist group hoping for societal collapse. This ideology, embraced by many white supremacist groups, is known as accelerationism. Adherents believe that the United States must suffer total societal collapse so a white ethnostate can rise from the ashes. Both NSC 131 and the Base are known to practice firearms training. The Base is classified as a terrorist organization by



Two examples of graffiti messages defacing buildings at the State School property. (Tristan Chase/Courtesy photos)

Great Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Locke addressed investigating the graffiti in his response to Stamps.

“I have spoken with Chief [Matt] Canfield who has informed me that the Laconia Police Department will take a report and investigate the graffiti that you have documented,” Locke wrote, adding that the department also spoke with the Department of Administrative Services, which manages the property. “We have also referred the incidents to the FBI’s agent for civil rights here in New Hampshire, and she will work with the Laconia Police Department to provide whatever assistance and support the FBI can bring to bear on this matter.”

Laconia Police Chief Matt Canfield confirmed there is an ongoing investigation of the tags.

“Some of those images were dating back to July, some were as recent as December,” Canfield said. “We don’t have any cameras up there. We’re looking at putting some of our mobile cameras up there to deter it in the future. It’s definitely a tough investigation to initiate now.”

The tagging at the State School property is just the latest example of white supremacist imagery showing up in the Lakes Region. Last fall, red swastikas were found at Opechee Park, and another was carved into a shelf at the Laconia Public Library. Canfield said police have not found anything to indicate the incidents are related.

Canfield is part of the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Joint Terrorism Task Force. “At this point, they aren’t involved,” Canfield said. “They’ve offered assistance if needed, but there isn’t anything we need assistance on right now.”

FBI spokesperson Kristen Setera said that, as part of Department of Justice policy, the FBI could not confirm or deny

the existence of an investigation. Setera declined to comment on the FBI’s offer of assistance to the Laconia Police Department, as well as declining a request to speak with an expert on NSC 131.

“The FBI does not track or monitor membership in groups, as membership in a group is not illegal in and of itself,” Setera said. “The FBI focuses on individuals who commit or intend to commit violence and criminal activity that constitutes a federal crime or poses a threat to national security. The authority is

based on illegal activity, not on political views, race, ethnicity, national origin, or religion. Our mission is to protect the American people and uphold the Constitution. That mission is both dual and simultaneous — it is not contradictory.”

According to the ACLU, in recent years

the FBI has encouraged school teachers and administrators to monitor and report on students expressing or exploring extremist ideology. Whether that effort has helped curb extremism in Lakes Region youth remains to be seen.

Stamps appreciated the response from the Attorney General’s Office and highlighted the importance of calling out and addressing hateful acts.

“Maybe there are very young people involved in some of those, but I think society needs to, at best, teach them that they don’t consider that an acceptable form of humor, if that’s what they were thinking,” Stamps said. “When you’re dealing with hate symbols that go through the core of many people’s pain from past experiences, including all the way back to the Holocaust and the Black lived experience, that’s on our agenda.”

Stamps noted the Human Relations Committee will address the tags in the next few weeks.

“You had to know something to use different symbols. I don’t think you can toss it off as 14-year-old kids being stupid. Even if it is, it’s not acceptable in our city.”

— Lois Kessin

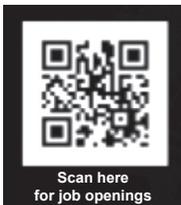


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