

Former white supremacist embraces Christ, sheds hate

July 20, 2012

RIVES TOWNSHIP, Mich. (RNS)—Two years ago, Chris Simpson led a white pride march. But early this year, he abandoned the white supremacy movement, and on April 15, he was baptized.

Five days later, Simpson sat in the waiting room of a skin and vein clinic, waiting to start the long and painful process of having his tattoos—more than 40 of them, most replete with Nazi or white pride iconography—removed.

Chris Simpson wipes away water from his face after being baptized by New Horizons Community Church pastor Jerry Lyons Sunday morning, April 15. (RNS PHOTO/Sean Proctor)

"Hate will blind you to so many things. It will stop you from having so many things," Simpson said. "It consumes you."

Simpson, a 38-year-old trash collector and former Marine, said he has given up on hate. It is a decision he made for his family, for his wife, Misty, and his children, 9-year-old Cody, 7-year-old Kayleigh, 5-year-old Nikolaus and 2-year-old twins, Tyrsson and Aeric.

Simpson was a member of Battalion 14, a white pride group with supporters in Michigan. His involvement in the white pride movement began in a place of pain, frustration, anger and confusion. On April 28, 2000, he and his wife lost their first child, Alexis Nic-ole. Born with open spina bifida, a buildup of fluid in the brain, clubbed feet, and no intestines or stomach, Alexis lived only two and a half hours. Her death sent Simpson

reeling.

"I was feeling a lot of anger and hatred, and I was confused," he said. "I just built up this hatred or what I thought was hatred."

Simpson directed that emotion, with the help of a white pride group in his community, at people of other races. He believed other races were succeeding at the expense of white people. They were driving nice cars, living in nice houses, watching nice televisions while he and his wife struggled.

In December, fighting within the organization, what seemed like total reliance on the Simpsons to finance the group's activities and hearing his children use racist slurs caused him to call it quits.

"It was time to make a change for them," Simpson said of his children. "I don't want them following that path."

In April, Simpson stood in the baptismal pool at New Horizons Community Church. He wore a white tank top and white shorts, tattoos on full display for the congregation.

Pastor Jerry Lyon placed his hand on Simpson.

"God, I know that there are things from his past life that need to be buried. And God, today we enjoy the opportunity. We take glory in that opportunity to bury that old life and to say to you, God, I am a new creation in Jesus Christ," Lyon prayed.

With Simpson holding his nose, Lyon lowered him back into the water. The congregation applauded.



Former white supremacist Chris Simpson shouts in pain as Amy Sowers starts removing one of his racist tattoos. Simpson wanted to begin removing the reminders of his past after he committed his life to Christ. (RNS PHOTO/Sean Proctor)

"Any kind of burdens I carried before, I let them go. There's no need to carry things that happened in the past," Simpson later said. "I forgave all those who have wronged me and asked for forgiveness from those that I have wronged."

Simpson's baptism came about a month after he and family watched the movie *Courageous* and decided to attend New Horizons. The movie, produced by Sherwood Baptist Church in Albany, Ga., follows the lives of four police officers who excel at their jobs but flounder in the task of fatherhood.

Simpson connected with the movie, both out of his desire to be a police officer and his fatherless childhood. His father and stepfather were not part of his life. His grandfather, the man he looked to as father, died of leukemia when Simpson was 11. It was then that Simpson turned his back on God.

Within a month after Simpson and his family began attending New

Horizons, he was baptized. He attends a Bible study. Prayers start meals and end days. His children, once picking up on Simpson's racism, now model his Christianity.

"When we accepted Christ, it was like this whole house was transformed," Simpson said of his family. "I'm just hoping this roller-coaster ride keeps going up."

Simpson tapped his feet and looked around the lobby of the Skin and Vein Center in Fenton. A busload of people surrounded him. They were participants in the Freedom Ink Tattoo Removal program, a free service offered by the Detroit Hispanic Development Corporation to help people remove prison or gang tattoos. James Phillips, the re-entry service manager who runs the program, invited Simpson to participate.

"This is one of the vehicles that people can use to make changes in their life," Phillips said.

Tough-looking men went into an office and came out only minutes later with large bandages. Phillips told Simpson tattoos hurt more coming off than going on.

Tattoo removal takes years. A single tattoo can take several treatments to disappear.

Simpson said it felt like someone poured acid on his skin.

"I don't care if you're a Marine, that right there will break you," he said.

Of the 42 tattoos covering his body, his first treatment targeted four. Simpson hopes to continue with tattoo removal throughout the summer. His family still attends New Horizons Church, and his wife, despite a fear of water, recently was baptized. The Simpsons started a new group aimed at helping people, called RAC—Random Acts of Christ.

"Well, that's a start. This is going to be a long process," he said. "But you know what? It's going to be worth it in the end."