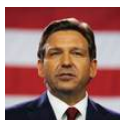




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# For those seeking to escape extremist groups, the path out is often uncertain

By Desiree Stennett  
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Neo-Nazis and white supremacists march through the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia, the night before the "Unite the Right" rally, on Aug. 11, 2017. (Zach D Roberts/NurPhoto/TNS/TNS)

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Before Samantha could escape the white supremacist hate group she joined almost a year prior, she had to accept that leaving was more important to her than living.

It was August 2017. Heather Hyer had just been killed by a man who rammed his car through a sea of protesters [during the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville](#). The leaders of [Identity Evropa](#), the group Samantha joined the previous December, helped plan the rally. But Samantha, who could sense the potential for danger, didn’t go.

Instead, she watched in horror as the deadly violence unfolded on TV at the restaurant where she worked.

“I remember texting my mom and texting some of my friends — the

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few people that really stuck around — and I basically said, ‘Look, I’m leaving. I don’t know how. I don’t know exactly when. I can’t talk to you right now and if you never talk to me again, I need you to know that I am not a part of this anymore. I am done,’” Samantha said.

She would go on to secretly leave the group, hiding first in the home of a woman who knew nothing of her past but was willing to rent a room to her without signing a lease or creating a paper trail. Years later, Samantha would share her experience in the group with authorities in the investigation into the planning of the deadly rally.

Samantha, a former white supremacist and member of hate group Identity Evropa chronicled her journey into and out of white supremacy. Because she fears for her safety, she asked that her last name and location be withheld. (Courtesy of Samantha)

In a series of interviews with the Orlando Sentinel, Samantha, now 33, chronicled her journey into and out of white supremacy. The Sentinel granted her request to

withhold her last name and location to protect her safety after verifying her identity and story.

Violent white nationalism exploded again on a massive scale on Jan. 6, 2021 when thousands of far-right extremists stormed the U.S. Capitol in an attempt to stop the certification of President Joe Biden’s win over former President Donald Trump. Among those arrested, more were from Florida than nearly any other state, including Central and South Florida leaders of the Proud Boys, one of the most infamous extremists groups in the nation.

Samantha said she does not expect that sharing will absolve her of her past. Instead, she hopes telling how she left the alt-right and rebuilt her life will erode some of the control exerted by leaders of groups like Identity Evropa and light a pathway for those who want to leave.

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It's common for people to remain in hate groups out of fear that they will never again be accepted by people outside of the group and leaders often exploit that fear by threatening to expose members who attempt to leave, experts say.

“We'd like to believe that we are a society of rehabilitation and second chances,” said Patrick Riccards, executive director of [Life After Hate](#), a nonprofit founded by former violent extremists that helps people interested in leaving. “But violent, far-right extremism is one of those areas where we don't seem to be as enlightened. When you look at what individuals of the violent far right are capable of and have done, we largely believe as a society that they can't be rehabilitated.”

But what that skepticism fails to understand is that the experiences that radicalize people and send them toward hate groups are fairly common, said Ryan Andrew Brown, a senior behavioral and social scientist at California-based research organization the RAND Corporation.

“The events or background factors triggering the stress that these individuals note lead some people to not do anything criminal or violent and lead others to engage in things like substance abuse or gang violence or other sorts of destructive behavior,” said Brown, who conducted a qualitative study that interviewed people who left extremists groups about how they were radicalized and deradicalized. “It's really a very broad funnel at the very beginning and what seems to drive folks to extremism in particular is this right place, right time phenomenon.”

Supporters of President Donald Trump, including many members of extremist groups like the Proud Boys, clash with the U.S. Capitol police during a riot at the US Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, in Washington, DC. (ALEX EDELMAN/Getty Images North America/TNS)

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# ‘Why not fascism?’

Brown’s study interviewed 36 people — 24 former extremists, 10 family members and two friends. They represented 32 cases of people who joined either far-right or Islamic extremist groups.

The study found that the most common reasons people cited for joining extremist groups were financial instability, mental health struggles and a sense of victimization and marginalization. Some kind of financial instability was mentioned in 22 of the 32 cases, according to the [research brief](#) Brown co-wrote based on the study published last year.

“I was like, yeah, getting out (of the military) with 11 years in, I should be able to get a job on base, no problem, as a contractor,” one former white supremacist told researchers. “Nah, that didn’t happen. So, I decided to blame my problems on somebody else and say, ‘Oh, it’s Black people’s fault.’”

Brown said the difference between those who experience hardship and turn to extremism and those who have similar experiences and don’t become extremists can often come down to who notices the hardship.

“Someone who’s part of an extremist group notices distress or the social isolation and then targets the individual to pull them into the extremist ideology, which gives them a sense of meaning,” Brown said. “The organizations know how to capitalize on those experiences and it takes the group starting to relieve that distress through a sense of meaning, a sense of purpose and through social relationships.”

For Samantha, her then-boyfriend was her introduction into white supremacy.

The two had already dated and broken up once before but rekindled their relationship in August 2016. Right away, she could tell he seemed darker. He was critical of her partying and had no interest in drinking with her. Instead, he spent all of his time reading websites she later learned were white supremacist blogs and he started to share racist memes as “jokes.”

When Samantha confronted him months later in November 2016 about how his behavior was changing she said he finally told her, “I’m a fascist and I don’t want to be with anyone who doesn’t want to be a fascist.”

Initially, Samantha said she started to read the websites in the hope that she could expose the error in judgement that led him to white supremacy but she was also feeling lost at the time. She had jumped from job to job in the hospitality industry and though she was always told she was smart as a child and was placed in gifted classes, she was dissatisfied with her life. She didn’t understand why at 27, she had never lived up to her potential. She felt failed and she didn’t want to see her relationship fail too.

So she convinced herself that there was nothing wrong with fascism.

“I just spent all this time getting back together with him and investing in my relationship with him,” she said. “I had no idea what I was really getting myself into but I was like ‘Sure, I’ve tried a bunch of other things, why not fascism.’”

Within a month, Samantha, who had canvassed for former president Barack Obama in her Florida town as a teenager and, though she didn’t vote in 2016, had supported Hillary Clinton, joined Identity Evropa, a white separatist group that believed in racial segregation and preached the virtue of “peaceful ethnic cleansing.”

She quickly became the group's women's coordinator. As more women found the group, she was the person who interviewed them before they could join. Soon, she was interviewing men too.

Though the relationship that brought her into the alt-right movement quickly failed, Samantha said she found purpose among other white nationalists, much like the people interviewed in Brown's study.

"At the time, I had a job that I didn't feel like I was very good at," she said. "I was in a relationship where I didn't know how to be a very good girlfriend. But I had all of this information at my fingertips. I was learning all about this movement. It was the one thing I could do that felt productive. And that's what the movement wants."

White nationalist demonstrators walk into the entrance of Lee Park surrounded by counter demonstrators in Charlottesville, Va., Saturday, Aug. 12, 2017. (Steve Helber/AP)

## 'I had to make peace with death'

Even before the Unite the Right rally, Samantha said she was already starting to question the movement. While its leaders claimed to be peaceful, she saw so much violence inside. Women who she helped bring into the organization whispered stories of abuse, she said, and Samantha herself was a victim of violence and threats.

And the contradictions in their belief systems were endless.

For example, Samantha was trained to believe that she couldn't support the legacy of South African leader Nelson Mandela and his anti-apartheid movement because she couldn't "support a man who had spent the majority of his adult life in prison." Yet she said members of her alt-right circle praised Adolf Hitler and did Nazi

salutes in private, burned books written by Jewish authors, used quotes by neo-Nazis as part of their foundational beliefs and lionized people like Dylann Roof, the man who walked into a Black South Carolina church in 2015 and killed nine people. Some even referred to Roof as “Saint Roof” and got bowl cuts to mimic his haircut, she said.

When she questioned this, she was dismissed and told, “You can’t pick your martyrs.”

Still, for months, she convinced herself that Roof and other violent white supremacists were different from the more “sophisticated” people she associated with, dated and befriended. But the day of the Unite the Right rally, watching people she knew be violent “for no reason” on live television, the illusion was shattered.

“There’s no Olympian-style mental gymnastics that you can do to excuse this behavior,” she said. “You realize that you have to make the choice to do something. Either I had to join them or I had to be willing to leave. ... When I said I wanted to leave, they threatened to kill me. They threatened to dox me. They told me they would break my legs and rape me.

“They told me all these things and I had to make peace with death and kind of say ‘Either I’m going to leave and I’ll be found in a ditch somewhere but I can at least know that I chose to leave this. Or I have to be as bad as them.’ There was no way in my lifetime, for me, that I could be a part of that.”

It took two months to get herself out.

Samantha said she was living with the leader of Identity Evropa. She had been cut off from most of her family and friends outside of the alt-right movement. Even if they were willing to help, she was afraid



to put them in danger. She felt alone so she started with a storage unit.

Every day she went to work she would pack one box. She slowly emptied her bedroom, she took a leave from her role as women's coordinator, pretending that she had plans to come back so she wouldn't raise suspicion. She found a place to stay and one day she just disappeared. She didn't even tell her family where she was going.

The weeks and months after leaving a hate group are a fragile time. People often have little support and those looking for support can often have a hard time finding it — isolation that can sometimes draw people back into extremism, said Katharina Meredith, a doctoral student in community psychology at Georgia State University.

“Very few universities, if any, train social workers or therapists on what it is like to join, be in and leave extremism,” she said. “That’s not something that on anyone’s radar.”

To aid in this part of the process, Meredith is in the final stages of creating a framework mental health professionals can use to evaluate patients who are former white supremacists or were members of other kinds of extremist groups. Her research and framework will be published next spring.

She said the stressors that can derail recovery can range from mental health struggles and fears about physical health and safety to managing new relationships and social skills and fear over evidence of past hateful speech, such as old social media posts being found.

“The normal stuff you can expect is anxiety and depression, but then digital footprint and online posting history is also a stressor that

might not be caught as obviously” by a mental health provider, she said.

In the five years since Samantha left Identity Evropa, she has had to work through her own stressors after finding a therapist through Life After Hate, where she now works helping others leave hate groups. She said the most illuminating thing about her own recovery is finally getting to a place where she is planning for her future.

“I definitely thought I’d be dead within six weeks so even being alive was great,” she said. “When I left, I didn’t have any sense of what the future would hold. I couldn’t see that far. I knew that I went through this huge range of emotions from absolute elation of being finally free to sheer terror of knowing that at any point in time someone might find me and hurt me or try and do something to put me in harm’s way. ...

“The fact that I am making plans for a year from now, the fact that I am looking at my life in that way. I can put away and save money now because I might not need it as a tool to escape at some point. I can build relationships with people that are actually meaningful and profound and interesting and dynamic because I plan on sticking around. It’s a wild thing that, when I left, I thought would never happen.”

## Need help?

If you or someone you know is trying to leave an extremist group, these organizations may be able to help.

Life After Hate: [lifeafterhate.org](https://lifeafterhate.org)

Parents for Peace: [parents4peace.org](https://parents4peace.org)

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