

Lessons from Mulugeta Seraw's beating death changed Portland

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Joe Brugger, The Oregonian

Stephanie Yao/The Oregonian

Seraw case U.S. District Judge Ancer Haggerty (hands in the air) and lawyer Elden Rosenthal (right) recount their experiences in the case of Mulugeta Seraw to mark the 20th anniversary of the black man's death at the hands of Portland skinheads who used a bat to beat him to death. The crime prompted the enactment of Oregon's groundbreaking hate-crime law. It also set the stage for a civil trial that financially crippled one of the nation's most influential racists.

*(Editor's note: To hear reporter Lynne Terry's podcast about the 20th anniversary of the Seraw killing, go to **Today in Oregon**)*

Twenty years after local skinheads beat to death a Portland State University

student from Ethiopia, the lawyer who helped win a \$12.5 million civil judgment against a white supremacist for inciting the attack said Thursday that society shouldn't assume such violent racism is a thing of the past.

"I'm here to say that even though we have elected an African American president, there is an irreducible 1 percent the population that hides under the rocks," Elden Rosenthal said.

"The value of the case was that we shined a light under those rocks for a couple of weeks in Portland."

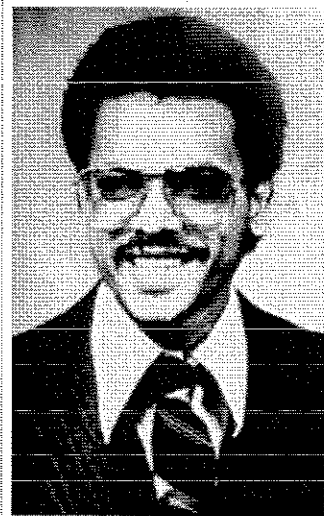
Rosenthal spoke during a presentation in the courtroom of U.S. District Judge Ancer Haggerty, who as a Multnomah County Circuit Court judge presided over the civil trial in 1990 of Tom Metzger, a California TV repairman who founded the group White Aryan Resistance.

On Nov. 13, 1988, three skinheads attacked Mulugeta Seraw on a street in Southeast Portland. Two years later, a Multnomah County jury returned a verdict against Metzger and his son, John, for organizing and inciting the attack.

Rosenthal explained how the civil case came to be. He said Dave Mazzella, a recruiter for the Metzgers who had worked with the Portland skinheads, walked into the office of the Jewish Anti-Defamation League in Santa Ana, Calif., and said he had information about a murder.

The league put Mazzella in contact with Morris Dees at the Southern Poverty Law Center. Mazzella became the Seraw family's star witness, Rosenthal said, providing the link between Tom Metzger, his son and the Portland skinheads.

Metzger represented himself in the case and worked to remove judges he thought were Jewish, so he was probably surprised to find himself



MULUGETA SERAW Fatally beaten in 1988

The criminal case

before Haggerty, who is African American. Haggerty talked about the unprecedented security at the trial. The Metzgers, Rosenthal and the judge were all given 24-hour police protection.

The city has made "a lot of progress" since then, said Randy Blazak, a Portland State sociology professor and chairman of the Coalition Against Hate Crimes. A major change since the Seraw case is that the Portland Police Bureau has a detective dedicated to bias crimes, he said.

The city also reacts strongly to racist activities, he said, recalling a cross-burning in Southeast Portland in 2001 that prompted community outrage.

"Portland is still associated with this crime; that's why it's important to promote inclusion," Blazak said. "We still have racist skinheads. We haven't put all that in the past, we've just changed how we respond."

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Two of the three men who attacked Mulugeta Seraw remain in prison, according to Oregon Department of Corrections records.

Kenneth M. Mieske, 43, is serving a life sentence for murder at the Oregon State Penitentiary. His earliest possible release date is Jan. 16, 2024.

Kyle H. Brewster, 39, sentenced to 20 years for first-degree manslaughter, completed his sentence in 2002, but got into trouble last spring for assaulting a public safety officer in Umatilla County and was returned to prison. Brewster is serving his time at the Oregon State Penitentiary. He could be released as early as Dec. 17.

Steven R. Strasser, 40, also sentenced to prison for manslaughter, completed his sentence Nov. 19, 1999, and was released. Strasser remains on parole through Multnomah County.