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# SANDPOINT

M A G A Z I N E

## WHO WE ARE

THE OJ TRIAL SWEEPS  
SANDPOINT INTO A  
NATIONAL SPOTLIGHT THAT  
ILLUMINATES ... NOTHING.

*Inside, the Real Story*

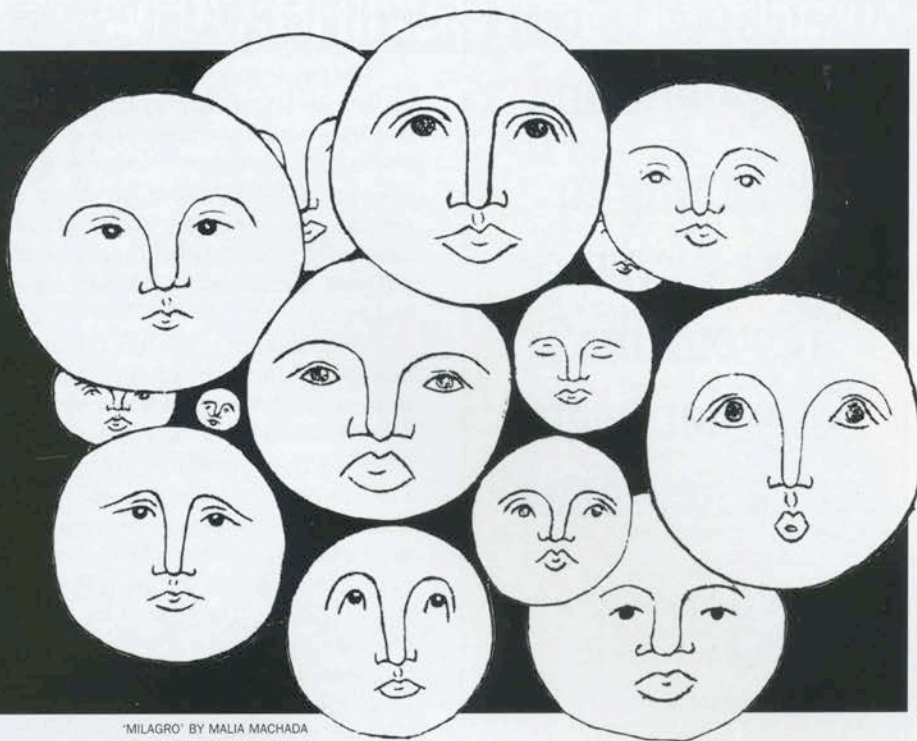
## SCHWEITZER THIS WINTER

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# WHO WE ARE



"MILAGRO" BY MALIA MACHADA

BY SANDY COMPTON

## A sensational trial 1,500 miles away sucked Sandpoint into its vortex

**S**ANDPOINT HAS GOTTEN a lot of press lately, much of it uncomplimentary and inaccurate, and most of it having to do with one Los Angeles policeman who decided to move here. Retiring LAPD detective Mark Fuhrman bought a house in Sandpoint in early 1995. When he did, he brought a lot of attention with him.

Euclid, the street in Sandpoint where his new home sits, is one of the roughest in town. That is to say, it needed paving badly, even before the onslaught of television trucks, reporters and gawkers. Its condition has not improved, but it hasn't deteriorated, either. In fact, things haven't changed much at all on Euclid, or in the city of Sandpoint, despite the pointing fingers and cameras of a sensationalist media.

Tongues and pencils have been wagging about Fuhrman and his behavior in connection with perhaps the largest media circus ever televised, the double-murder trial of O.J. Simpson. Somehow, Sandpoint and its residents have found themselves in the spotlight with him. Even Judge Lance Ito alluded to Sandpoint when he said of his own lack of tolerance for antics in his courtroom, "This is not Sandpoint, Idaho."

No, it's not. And Sandpoint is not Mark Fuhrman, white separatist Randy Weaver or avowed racist Richard Butler — the trio who have brought scrutiny upon Sandpoint. As they would be in most any community, these people are flukes in an otherwise calm and beautiful corner of the world. To say that they represent Sandpoint or Idaho is akin to likening a man to Adolph Hitler because he has a mustache.

This can be said unequivocally: Sandpoint and North Idaho are not a "haven for racists," much to the disappointment of some who would have it be so. That includes a national media anxious to report sensationalistic stories.

In fact, Richard Butler's so-called Aryan Nations 35 miles

south of Sandpoint is in decline, it seems, though to deem them harmless would be a big mistake. Attendance at their rallies has been dropping since 1992, when internal problems and defections began to disrupt leadership. At any one time there is fewer than a dozen skinheads or adherents living at the compound.

The federal government's siege of the Randy Weaver family three years ago at Ruby Ridge, 25 miles north of Sandpoint, led to a lot of publicity. Their neighbors were more upset about the presence and tactics of the assault force than they were about the Weavers' religious and political views. The neighbors' reluctance to condemn Weaver led to a lot of media hoopla. Randy Weaver is an avowed "white separatist," but when troops show up to blast someone out of their home, and it is someone one has shared recipes and gone hunting with, it upsets the neighbors. When children and mothers are killed, as Weaver's son and wife were, it upsets them more.

But the Fuhrman phenomenon is most amazing because he only had to *think* about moving here to focus the attention of the media on Sandpoint.

**GREW UP** near Sandpoint, starting about 40 years ago, and admittedly this did not give much opportunity for cultural encounters. We have been, and still are, a largely white community. The Census Bureau reports only about 2 percent of the Bonner County population is not Caucasian, and our largest and fastest-growing minorities are Hispanic and Native American. In this respect, Sandpoint is similar to most small towns in the Northwest, a region which is predominantly white.

Because so few people of color live in northern Idaho, long-time residents simply don't have a chance to know people of other ethnic backgrounds. Helen Newton, 53, Sandpoint's City Clerk for the last 15 years, can attest to that. "I don't know a single black person," she says. "I've lived here all my life.



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That's terrible, but I just don't know any minorities. The first time I saw a black person, I was 13 and went to Spokane."

Nevertheless, what I learned growing up here about relationships with others was to operate from a position of respect, no matter what color the other person's skin was. I don't know quite who taught me this, but it probably was an accumulation of lessons learned from a lot of different sources in my schools, churches and home.

But Sandpoint is not free of the racism all Americans encounter in one form or another. Last summer, driving down Pine Street in the evening, I was handed a flyer through my open window. I took it because I was curious, and ended up sickened by its message. In all the years I have lived here, it was my first encounter with the members of the Aryan Nations. The tone of the flyer was blatantly racist and sadly ignorant. The flyer attacked Sandpoint Mayor Ron Chaney for welcoming "those whites who are sincerely ashamed of being white," and "displaying the welcome mat to all non-whites, especially those on welfare." It was somewhat ironic, since Chaney has become a media magnet for his defense of Mark Fuhrman.

Chaney has taken heat locally and nationally for his statements about Fuhrman, whom he describes as his "good friend." Chaney is mayor, but he does not speak as a representative of Sandpoint on this issue. He speaks instead from his personal relationship that sprung up after his wife Rose, a Realtor, sold the Fuhrmans their house.

Chaney maintains that the racial slurs and graphic violence described in the by-now-famous Fuhrman tapes are merely part of a dictated screenplay, which the screenwriter subsequently tried to sell to tabloid magazines and Simpson defense lawyer Johnny Cochrane.

Fuhrman himself has refused all comment. Citing his friendship with the man, Chaney has steadfastly refused to condemn Fuhrman. He has never heard Fuhrman use profanity, Chaney says. "I was totally shocked by those tapes."

But Chaney makes a distinction in his support for Fuhrman, basing it on a friendship in which he says Fuhrman has emphasized he is not racist. "The Mark Fuhrman that worked and lived in Los Angeles is not welcome in Sandpoint," says Chaney. "The Mark Fuhrman that lives in Sandpoint, the Mark Fuhrman that is my friend, is very welcome in Sandpoint."

Fuhrman's presence in Sandpoint has

attracted media from around the world. All major television networks — ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, CNN — have sent crews here. Print media from the *New York Times* to the *Los Angeles Times* to European newspapers and magazines have besieged the town. Fuhrman has dodged them all, and they inevitably leave without ever having spoken to him.

**T**HE FUHRMAN HOME on Euclid, with its darkened and covered windows, might be what the media have concentrated on, but as some have discovered, the real story of Sandpoint is up the street and around the corner, in the office of Buzz Arndt, a member of the board of directors of the Bonner County Human Rights Task Force.

Arndt moved here in 1980 from Boulder, Colo., where he was also active in human rights issues, and his involvement here began soon after his arrival, in response to Richard Butler's group in Hayden Lake. He does not dismiss them as mere kooks.

"Those guys are believers," he says. "You can't say they are just screwed up. They believe intensely in this. They also say they are not racist — they are 'racialists,' who believe everyone should be proud of their race. But they advocate aggressively against minorities and want to create a white homeland."

Arndt and Realtor Dan McLaughlin spearheaded the Human Rights Task Force in 1992, but its foundation was laid a year earlier at a rally in Sandpoint at which Bill Wassmuth of the Kootenai County Task Force on Human Relations spoke.

Current Task Force President Brenda Hammond was at that rally. "The response to Bill Wassmuth made me proud to be a part of this community," she says. "There was a standing ovation from over 300 people."

Not everyone there was thrilled, though. "In the middle of the gym was a small group who did not stand, and displayed swastikas," Hammond recalled. "It was Richard Butler, Floyd Cochran and others."

Floyd Cochran, who later defected from the Aryans Nations and renounced his racist views, told the Task Force that the show of support at that meeting for Wassmuth and his message of tolerance caused Richard Butler to reconsider his plan to become more active in Sandpoint.

Donna Parrish is the Task Force secretary. She has never seen or been involved in any kind of racist confrontation, but she believes in making a statement. "One of the dangers of living in a community



as homogenous as ours," she says, "is that your viewpoint can become narrow and brittle."

The Task Force has about 170 members, with a goal of 400 by the end of next year. Parrish pointed out that even at 170 members, if the Los Angeles area had a Task Force in the same proportion to its population, it would have 40,000 members. Annual dues are only a dollar. Parrish says membership gives people a chance to "be a visible part of the community and provides an opportunity to demonstrate their support for human rights."

Hammond, Arndt and Parrish all pointed out that the Task Force is striving hard to increase its activities, which includes 70 marchers in Sandpoint's Fourth of July parade, a booth at the county fair, and a dance billed as a "Harvest of Harmonies." They sponsored a civil rights speaker from Guatemala in October.

In June, Bill Wassmuth reprised his 1991 visit to Sandpoint. Wassmuth is one of the founders of and now executive director of the Northwest Coalition Against Malicious Harassment, a Seattle-based group working for human rights.

Brenda Hammond was there and describes the gathering as "500 smiling people and 10 scowling skin-heads."

The skinheads were confrontational and copped most of the press for the evening. KXLY reporter Jennifer Jolly balanced her coverage by going inside to talk to some of the 500. The next day, the windshield of her car was smashed.

**WITH THAT KIND OF RESPONSE**, and given the public's current taste for the sensational, the antics of Fuhrman, Butler and Weaver are easily outdrawing the quiet work of organizations like the Task Force. That, of course, is what Butler *et al* want.

Fuhrman's disappearing act, though, has had an up side, according to Hammond. "The national media being in town, and coming up empty all the time has led them to seek us out. We're tired of being given a black eye. I'm not saying we're perfect, but we are a community no more deserving of the label 'racist' than any other."

To combat the image of Sandpoint portrayed in the press recently, a committee of local business people, task force members and representatives of the Chamber of Commerce has been formed.

## WHAT BRINGS THEM HERE

**W**ho lives in Sandpoint? Statistics show the town and surrounding Bonner County are largely white — about 98 percent, in fact. The second largest ethnic group is Hispanic, with 516 people comprising 1.6 percent of the county's 31,890 total population. Native Americans, with 394 individuals, are the next largest group. There are 60 Asians — and only 35 blacks, about .1 percent.

Fast growth is changing the character of the population. The county population has more than doubled since 1970, adding 5,200 persons from 1990 to 1994 alone. They come even though wages here lag well below state and national averages. The average annual wage here is \$18,387 — only 70 percent of the average \$26,362 wage in the U.S.

The fact is, most of the people in Sandpoint are from someplace else. What brings these new arrivals, and what do they find when they get here? The answer is different for each.

### ■ Kevin and Karen Watson

are the archetypal new Sandpoint arrivals: they moved here last Labor Day after searching the Northwest for their ideal town. They came from Missouri, and from their first visit were struck by Sandpoint's beauty, friendliness and active arts scene. "As soon as we drove into Sandpoint, we said, 'This is what we like.' It was intuitive," Kevin said.



The couple, who are white, have an infant daughter. Kevin, a copywriter, believes he can recruit work from outside the area. Regardless, they are willing to scale back their lifestyle to live a simpler life here.

Sandpoint has less racial diversity than Missouri said Kevin, "but it's more diverse as far as attitudes. More people are willing to be individuals." Echos Karen: "It's a happy community. I also felt like I could be me."

■ **Michael Turnbull** is white and his wife **Junko** is Japanese. They have a one-year-old named Christopher and do worry about his acceptance at school in the future. Michael is a graphic artist, while Junko works as a translator.

Before marrying Michael and moving here, Junko lived in Los Angeles. "When I moved here, it was very uncomfortable. I felt that I was stared at and perhaps not welcome. That may have been my self-consciousness," she says. "When I got to know the people I felt better. The people here are better than in the city."

Junko has had one bad experience working in a bank here. When she could not comply with a customer's request, the woman became angry and raised the question of race to another teller.

Michael feels some of the stereotyping as Junko's husband. "People assume I was either in the military, or got her out of a magazine."

■ **Bob and Linda Aavedal** own the Alpine Shop in Sandpoint and at Schweitzer. Bob did not have far to go when he moved here: he grew up in Naples, 20 miles north. Linda moved from Minnesota about 30 years ago. They have three children. Their oldest, Sarah, is Nez Perce and their second, John, is of

Hispanic and white descent. Jessica, the youngest, is their natural child.

Sarah is in college now, and the Aavedals are encouraging her to find out about her heritage. They thought Sarah had not had a lot of problems with racial issues until they learned an essay she had written for entrance to her college was on prejudice.

■ Eighth-grade artist **Malia Machado** made her statement about diversity when she painted a mural on the wall of Sandpoint Middle School this fall. She titled it *Milagro* — "miracle."

"My intention was to have faces from different nationalities," she said. The pen drawing of her black-and-white mural is on page 15.



Malia comes to Sandpoint for the school year from her home in Oakland, Calif., which is much more diverse. "The majority of people there are black and Mexican," she said. Here she is one of the few minority students in the student body of 690.

When she first came last year, she hated it. "I felt like I was being picked on by the principle, who's Mexican, too," she said. "It wasn't my choice to be here, but now it is my choice ... and I like it."

■ **Leon Atkinson** is a black classical guitarist of national renown. He moved here from New York state 21 years ago and has had few bad incidents in Sandpoint. "My experiences have been 99 percent positive," he said.

"Most people, white or black or anything in between, with the exception of those who declare themselves racist, don't think of themselves as racist. But if those people stand by and let friends or family make racial slurs, fat jokes, anti-gay statements, I feel that person is just as guilty of racism as the person making the statement."

"The only way we're going to make it a better world for everybody is for people to speak up when they encounter sick statements and not be part of the silent majority."

■ **Bob and Cindy Shenault** are a white couple who moved from Palm Desert, Calif., in May of this year. They bought a building lot here several years ago and are now building a log house.

Bob is a semi-retired producer and director. His experience in television led him to conclude the attention Sandpoint received from programs like "Hard Copy" is a case of the media creating the story they want. "It's just a selling case," he said.

Recently, Bob left his wallet sitting on top of the toolbox in the back of his pickup. When he returned he thought it was gone, but then found it stuffed between the toolbox and the cab of the pickup. The cab of his truck was locked and he is sure someone moved his wallet to keep it from being stolen. He is also sure that would never have happened in California. •





Jonathan Coe, executive director of the Greater Sandpoint Chamber of Commerce, says the news is not all bad.

"This is forcing us to look at human relations in this community, and we are finding that we can generally feel good. If good comes about because of all this, it will be because we are more aware of protecting human rights."

Another member of the ad hoc committee is School Superintendent Max Harrell. In his domain the Task Force is promoting a "Teaching Tolerance" program. Several teachers have taken the concept to heart. Linda Navarre, who teaches art and language arts to seventh and eighth graders, tries to teach about tolerance and diversity. She uses a magazine called *Teaching Tolerance*, a publication of the Southern Poverty Law Center. "I often read articles from there and ask my students to write in their journals about it," says Navarre. At the high school, teacher Dan Vanek has formed a human rights club; other teachers are adding human rights curriculum.

In an area that has so few minorities, perhaps there are other ways to measure the community's tolerance. In the 1994 state election, Initiative 1 was a ballot item that opponents strongly believed would deny human rights to gays. The

ballot measure was voted down in Idaho by a narrow margin, 3,098 votes out of 406,000 cast. In Bonner County it was defeated by 854 votes — which means little Sandpoint alone produced 28 percent of the plurality that defeated the initiative statewide.

There are more measures of tolerance. With a population of 6,000, Sandpoint's churches and community groups work actively to address social ills that go begging in much larger towns. There are three soup kitchens, a homeless task force, a shelter home, several groups that advocate on social issues. "This is an involved community," observes Buzz Arndt.

**IF ONE TAKES TIME** to study racists and learn how they operate, one learns they are big on the rhetoric of hate and the art of laying their problems on the shoulders of others. When they are met with resistance in the form of exposure and truth, they fade back into the woodwork. Sandpoint and the larger communities of North Idaho and the Northwest have formed organizations to combat racism with just those tools. Those organizations were formed before the world press came to town looking for something to say about Sandpoint.

Indeed, we are not a very ethnically

mixed community — but we are certainly a culturally diverse community. People from all over the planet are moving here (see sidebar). They come not for the purpose of bringing the "new world order," but for the purpose of bringing a new order to their lives.

And Sandpoint welcomes them all. In fact, it is only those who are themselves intolerant — the Richard Butlers, the skinheads, the racists of any stripe — who will find no welcome here.

Hopefully, the national media, who have by association tainted Sandpoint, will find that this is the real story. Out there in the great world, the relentless coverage of Sandpoint is coloring people's thinking of northern Idaho. Ron Chaney tells the story of a reaction he once received when traveling in Mexico. Talking with a friendly local who wanted to practice English, Chaney told the man he was from Idaho.

"He looked at me and said, 'Ah, potatoes and Nazis,'" said Chaney. "I thought that was a sad statement — an area as beautiful as ours being known for potatoes and Nazis. That's not Sandpoint at all."

*Sandy Compton is a lifelong Sandpointer. Chris Bessler, Billie Jean Plaster and Nann Alleman also contributed to this story.*

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