

SHINE ON IN MONTANA

Told by Jo Claire Hartsig

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Early in December, Tammie Schnitzer helped her little son, Isaac, stencil a menorah on his bedroom window in Billings, Montana. Like any five-year-old, he was proud of his holiday decorations. The family was celebrating Hanukkah, the Jewish festival of lights. Many non-Jews don't know the meaning of the holiday, or of the menorah, the candleholder with nine (or seven) candles. If you asked Tammie and Isaac, they'd be proud to tell you about it.

The story began over two thousand years ago, when Judea was invaded by the Syrian Greeks. A small yet determined band of Jewish freedom fighters waged an incredible, and victorious, guerrilla war against the Syrian army. During the bitter conflict, the Greeks tried to destroy the Jewish culture and religion. They ransacked the holy temple and extinguished the altar's eternal flame.

The Jewish people worked day and night to clean and restore their place of worship. Then they consecrated the temple once again. All that remained was to light the eternal flame. But they had only enough sacred oil to keep the lamp alight for one day.

Nevertheless, the Jews were committed. If they could burn the lamp for only one day, so be it. But, miraculously, the light didn't die on that day, or the next. For eight days the lamp burned, as brightly as it had on

the very first day, shining on the altar. In commemoration of the miracle, Jewish families celebrate Hanukkah with the menorah. They remember the miracle of the wondrous little lamp that kept the altar lit for eight amazing nights.

Shortly after Tammie and Isaac had finished stenciling their menorah, a brick flew through the decorated window and shattered it. The image of his menorah lay in bits and pieces, dangerously sharp, on the bed. The next day the *Billings Gazette* described the incident. Tammie was reported to be troubled by the advice of the investigating officer. "You'd better remove the symbol from your house," he had told her. But could a mother explain this to her son? Tammie thought Isaac was too young to be introduced to hatred like that.

As Margaret MacDonald, another Billings mother, read the paper that day, she was deeply touched by Tammie's question. She imagined having to explain to her own children that they couldn't have a Christmas tree in the window, because it wasn't safe. That was no way for a little boy to remember the holidays. She wanted Isaac to know this as a season of love, not hate and fear.

She remembered a story about the king of Denmark during the Nazi occupation of World War II. When Hitler ordered King Christian to force all Danish Jews to wear the Star of David on their chests, the king refused. In an act of courageous defiance, he placed the yellow star over his own heart, declaring that he and all his people were one. If Hitler wanted to persecute the Jews, he would have to take the king as well. The king was not to stand alone. His example inspired his countrymen, and Danes of all religions wore stars in solidarity with the Jews. The

Nazis couldn't pick out their "enemies." In Denmark there were no Jews, no Gentiles, only Danes.

It happened that Margaret had been reading *When Hate Groups Come to Town*, a book about how other communities had overcome similar challenges. She wanted to make a powerful statement against hate for Tammie and Isaac, and for all the children of Billings. She phoned her pastor, asking him to tell the Danish story during his Sunday sermon and pass out paper menorahs so that families could hang them in their windows. The pastor agreed, and spread the word to other churches. That Sunday, members of the congregation all over town began hanging menorahs in their windows. By the following weekend, other churches, businesses, and human rights and community groups had followed suit. Soon, menorahs shone from the windows of hundreds of non-Jewish homes. When Tammie and Isaac drove past them on the way to school, they felt a special connection with their community.

Concerned citizens called the police department, asking if they wouldn't be inviting danger with this action. They were told, in no uncertain terms, by Chief Wayne Inman, "There's greater risk in not doing it." Hate crimes in Billings had been on the rise. A small contingent of skinheads, Klan members, and other white supremacists had targeted Jews, nonwhites, gays, and lesbians for harassment, vandalism, and personal injury. If there was a time to stand together, it was now.

The townspeople of Billings rallied around Tammie and Isaac and all Jewish people, and not just in their living rooms. A sporting-goods store proclaimed NOT IN OUR TOWN! NO HATE. NO VIOLENCE. PEACE ON EARTH, On

its large billboard. A local high school posted a sign reading HAPPY HANUKKAH TO OUR JEWISH FRIENDS. People gathered for a vigil outside the synagogue during Sabbath services to protect those who worshiped inside.

But the battle of light against darkness was not easily won. Someone shot at the store's large billboard, and bullets riddled the high school's windows. Two United Methodist churches, adorned with menorahs, had their windows broken. Six non-Jewish families had car windows smashed; a note was left behind saying "Jew lover." The violence continued, but so did the love.

One day the *Gazette* published a full-page drawing of a menorah with an invitation to its readers to cut out the picture and place it in their windows. In this town with fewer than a hundred Jewish families, the menorah was proudly displayed in thousands of homes. Now the hate groups couldn't find their enemies. In Billings there were no Jews, no Gentiles, only friends.

As the holidays wore on, there were fewer incidents of violence. New friendships formed, and greater understanding developed. Ironically, the violence intended to rip that community apart only served to make it stronger. Now the people of Billings have new reasons to celebrate. If you ask them about their menorahs and what Hanukkah means to them, they'll be proud to tell you. It's about standing together in the face of hatred, overcoming violence with love, and the miracle of the light shining through the darkness.

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that.

Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

Want to help your church foster better relations in your community and undermine the appeal of hate groups? The Interfaith Department at the **Fellowship of Reconciliation** will show you how. Write to them at P.O. Box 271, Nyack, NY 10960; or visit their Web site, www.forusa.org.