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## Keynote Address

Sammy Rangel  
*Life After Hate*

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## KEYNOTE ADDRESS<sup>1</sup>

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Sammy Rangel

*The following is a transcription of Mr. Rangel's keynote address presented at the University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform Symposium, Alt Association: The Role of Law in Combating Extremism on November 17, 2018, at the University of Michigan School of Law. The transcript has been lightly edited for clarity.*

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### INTRODUCTION BY *JLR* ASSOCIATE SYMPOSIUM EDITOR, REBECCA MARSTON:

Hello and welcome to *JLR* Symposium's Keynote Address. I am pleased to introduce our Keynote speaker, Sammy Rangel. Sammy is the Executive Director and Co-Founder of Life After Hate, which is a national nonprofit committed to helping people leave white

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1. Sammy Rangel, Exec. Dir., Life After Hate, Keynote Address at the Univ. of Mich. Law School Journal of Law Reform Symposium: Alt-Association: The Role of Law in Combating Extremism (Nov. 17, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LmX-yBxj74I>.

supremacy groups.<sup>2</sup> Sammy holds a master's degree in social work from Loyola University in Chicago, and his autobiography, *Fourbears: The Myths of Forgiveness*,<sup>3</sup> chronicles his early life and the events that led him to become a social worker, peace activist, speaker, and trainer. Sammy is also the father of five daughters. Please join me in welcoming Sammy Rangel.

### **Sammy Rangel:**

Good afternoon, everyone. Michigan Law School, thank you for having us. The students who have put this on are second to none. It's taken us months for me to get here today. I think it averaged about eighteen emails just to figure the date, the time, and the location. I know a lot of lift went into that. I have a high value and high respect for the issue that you are taking on here today. As you can see, it's quite complex and not simple.

I don't feel any pressure after following the panel this morning, any of which could be the expert voice up here, given the leadership roles that they play.<sup>4</sup> And then of course, it dawned on me late last night, as I was walking back from the restaurant, that I'm speaking to a room full of lawyers, so this might be the toughest crowd I've had to speak to in a long time.

I'm going to talk a bit about our organization, the history of it, and some of the work we are doing in the field. But I'm also going to share some anecdotal examples of my own life, as a case study, to show the different levels of interaction with different systems throughout my life, and as part of what's helping us shape our own narrative as an organization, leading the fight in some ways.

## I. HISTORY AND WORK OF LIFE AFTER HATE

Life After Hate is a nonprofit organization. It came out of a group of men and women who were once a part of white supremacy groups here in the United States, many of whom were responsible for the initiation of that activity and those groups coming to particular areas of this nation. They themselves kind of opened the pathway, a doorway, for this type of behavior to exist.

Artem McCalis coined the term "Life After Hate" when he started to approach social justice issues around racism, bigotry, unequal-

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2. See LIFE AFTER HATE, <http://www.lifeafterhate.org> (last visited Apr. 13, 2019).

3. SAMMY RANGEL, *FOURBEARS: THE MYTHS OF FORGIVENESS* (2011).

4. David Dinelli, Deputy Legal Dir., S. Poverty Law Ctr., et. al., *MJLR Panel 1: Defining Extremism*, YOUTUBE (published Apr. 12, 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CbH40AqGakQ>.

ity, and a number of other issues through an online magazine. And that's how he recruited many of us, who are now co-founders of the nonprofit, through that initiative. We were asked to attend a summit against violent extremism in 2011 in Ireland. I believe the count was approximately eighty-five men and women who were once a part of hate groups from all over the world, not just necessarily what we think of here in America. There were members from FARC; there were men and women who had left camps that were run by Bin Laden, and there were IRA members, all of whom had changed their lives. We coined ourselves as 'Formers,' and we'll get into that in a little bit. But there were approximately 200 victims as well at the summit who had suffered at the hands of violent extremism. And even more notably, some of these victims were now partnering with the men and women who had committed these atrocities against them. I will get into some of those stories as well.

We were so inspired by what we saw there that it only took us a few months to launch the nonprofit. This was to spread the idea that we should be doing more, could be doing more, and wanted to be doing more.

To the gentleman who asked a question about grassroots,<sup>5</sup> we were basically, at that point, just men and women who were living in a different style or a different type of life who decided to jump into this fight and do something about it.

Our organization has undergone extensive growth, rapid growth, and we will talk about that as well because it is significant to the time and era that we live in. In essence, we were a bunch of friends who decided to try to run a nonprofit. In their defense, none of them had nonprofit experience. None of them were case managers. None of them were social workers. A handful of them had been through personal development like a counseling or a mentoring process, themselves. But some had not. There was just this goodwill to get involved and to do something. We all had this sense that when we started our change process, it would have been nice to have been around others who could have mentored us through that process and who had a similar experience. We wanted to leverage that experience, which is part of the reason this really seemed like a good idea for us.

As we started speaking out, we also knew that we needed to do something to provide ongoing support for men and women who we might potentially be able to help leave these white supremacy groups here in the United States. When we flew back from Ireland,

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5. *Id.* (referring to a question asked during the morning panel on Defining Extremism).

I got off the plane at O'Hare and flew out here, to Grand Rapids, Michigan, and we did our first intervention—under this idea of what we were going to do as an organization—with a white supremacy group out of Grand Rapids.

We also started to realize that we couldn't operate in a silo. I've always been a big proponent that just because you've been there and done that, it does not uniquely qualify you to do this work. Nor does a degree uniquely qualify you to do this work. Naturally, it takes a certain amount of work, ethics, concerns, and endeavors. It takes more than just experience and more than just education.

In 2016, we were awarded by the Obama Administration just over \$400,000 to do the work that Life After Hate was doing. We were the only nonprofit that was positioned to do this work. We were the only organization one hundred percent comprised of Formers doing this work. Out of the thirty-three applicants at that time, we were, I think, close to being number one on the list, and we were one of two organizations that were mentioned by name by the Administration—hailing us for the work that we were now in a position to do.

Then, we just tried to get a campaign message out—a beacon. When we operate under the “Exit” title,<sup>6</sup> that is an international title that is well-known to white supremacy groups around the world, it signals that we are the group, we are the beacon, that is helping off-ramp people trying to leave these extremist groups. Two things happen. One, you become public enemy number one for these groups because you are that beacon comprised of what they would consider race traitors, which is probably the worst thing you can be in the eyes of a white supremacist. And two, because of how much they hate us, they do quite a bit of marketing for us, informing their internal groups that we are out there, and then, they kind of know to look for us at this point. That P.S.A., that we won, that Emmy Award, was a part of that marketing campaign to get our message out there for these men and women.<sup>7</sup>

In 2017, in a very timely decision, our organization decided take things to the next level. We went from being a group of friends who were making decisions kind of collectively, very democratically I might add, and also operating off of a budget that included the lint in our pockets. We began to do something to professionalize the practices that we were undertaking. Now, I was the only person

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6. *Exit USA*, LIFE AFTER HATE, <https://www.lifeafterhate.org/exitusa/> (last visited Apr. 13, 2019).

7. Christine Picciolini & Michael Racanelli, *Free Radicals PSA: “There is Life After Hate”* (Chicago/Midwest Emmy Award ‘Best PSA’ 2016), YOUTUBE (May 11, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U5T8WUbpXK4>.

in the group of co-founders at this point who had any nonprofit experience or any sort of organizational skills to that degree or to that capacity, so I stepped off the board in an effort to step into a position where I could leverage that experience more directly in the day-to-day operations.

Then we quickly found out in May that we were awarded, unsolicited, by Kaepernick's camp, a \$50,000 donation for the work that we were doing.<sup>8</sup> Initially they offered us \$25,000, but the check arrived for \$50,000. That helped me feel a little bit more comfortable about leaving a full-time job and stepping into a role that we knew was pretty much not funded at the time.

And then in June, we knew behind the scenes, to be honest, that the funding was probably not going to make it to our doorstep.<sup>9</sup> After the election results were in, we had partners that were informing us, but it wasn't official. Then, in June, we got the official notice that the money that was awarded to Life After Hate would not be coming forth. And although we asked extensively for the information as to why, we really only got vague answers. One of the answers that we got as to why the grant was rescinded was because the second evaluation of the grant more or less changed the focus of what the Trump administration wanted to address and how they wanted to address it, and we no longer met the standards for that grant. In essence, it was like students taking a test and teachers using a different answer key to grade it. We were never given an opportunity to respond under the new guidelines. We also knew, when we looked at the list of people who had been awarded in that second review, that the majority of them were law enforcement. We will talk about that in a second here.

Ironically, just shortly after that, the country kind of grumbled a little bit when they saw national news about that. Just a few weeks later, the United Nations approached Life After Hate and said that they wanted to give us an award for our humanitarian efforts in combatting violent extremism here in the United States.<sup>10</sup> So, on the one hand, we felt kind of like we had been abandoned by our own leadership, and yet here we were—on the global stage—accepting an award from the United Nations for our efforts here.

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8. AJ Willingham, *While You Were Arguing About the Anthem, Colin Kaepernick Finished Donating \$1 Million*, CNN (Jan. 31, 2018, 5:49 PM), <https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/31/sport/colin-kaepernick-million-dollar-donation-pledge-anthem-nfl-trnd/index.html>.

9. See Ron Nixon & Eileen Sullivan, *Revocation of Grants to Help Fight Hate Under New Scrutiny After Charlottesville*, N.Y. TIMES (Aug. 15, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/15/us/politics/right-wing-extremism-charlottesville.html>.

10. See *Everyday Heroes*, GLOBAL HOPE COALITION, <http://globalhopecoalition.org/everyday-heroes/> (last visited Apr. 14, 2019) (revealing that Sammy Rangel was honored at the 2017 Everyday Heroes Gala).

## II. VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE UNITED STATES

Walking into this platform, we understood that there were certain obstacles that we were walking into. If I'm not mistaken (and I could be mistaken), I don't believe the term Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) was used by the Administration until 2013. I didn't hear the term being used, although I know people were working on that stuff prior to that. But it was kind of a sign of the times that the conversation was about to change.

Then, of course, we heard from our panel members about some of the setbacks that CVE encountered right away. And—this might be kind of like the grumblings within the networks of social services and community leaders who are doing this work—it was seen sort of as a mechanism to target, identify, and monitor particular groups in the Muslim society.

I heard from partners who are leading some of the interventions and outreach within that sector that they were not being given any assurances that they would not be held legally responsible for anything they found in their interventions. So now, you have social workers and outreach workers afraid to do the work that they're trying to position themselves to do.

Despite what I've seen internally, many efforts by the federal government to try to repair some of that damage to date have been highly unsuccessful. You can look at Los Angeles and current activities happening right now.<sup>11</sup> There are strong protests against any CVE initiatives just in the Los Angeles area alone.

Although it was true then—and we feel like it's even more true today—CVE ignores the domestic terrorist threat coming from the violent far right. I want to put a couple of prefaces out here, just so the audience understands what Life After Hate is talking about. When we talk about the far right, we are not talking about the political parties that you might think of when you think about government. We're talking about an ideology that is based on white supremacy but also could be anti-government or it could be anti-a particular individual group. For example, gay or lesbian populations, Muslims, immigrants, or whatever it might be. When we talk about extremism, we're talking about violence. We are talking about advocating for, inciting, or committing acts of violence in the name of that ideology or in the name of those groups.

This is where we are coming from, although we do know that this is a complex issue. I had the privilege of talking with some FBI

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11. See, e.g., *Lawsuit Demands Transparency on Trump 'Extremism' Program in Los Angeles*, ACLU (June 28, 2018), <https://www.aclusocal.org/en/press-releases/lawsuit-demands-transparency-trump-extremism-program-los-angeles>.

officials after the Las Vegas attack, and it was even rumored that the officials could not agree what to call that particular incident.<sup>12</sup> So even within our own government, there are battles and struggles to try to define it. It's not just us in this room who are struggling to define what that means.

We felt the change in the paradigm. We heard early on, as early as October of 2016, that CVE would be disbanded if the elections went a certain way. Sure enough, we witnessed some of that, and we're still witnessing some of that now. There is a heavy emphasis on Islamic terrorism. We feel that flies in the face of the evidence that we know about domestic terrorism here in the United States. It's not that, that type of terrorism shouldn't be taken seriously or shouldn't be a part of our thought process. But in the face of what we know is hard data, no one that I know is really challenging the data on this point. It's a factor of 3:1 when you look at the last ten years of violent extremism committed on U.S. soil. Seventy-four percent of those acts are committed by white supremacist groups or people with those leanings.<sup>13</sup> As we found out with Dylann Roof, who didn't belong to a group as far as we knew and never met a white supremacist in his life, but he still upheld and embraced that ideology.<sup>14</sup> And we could talk about the pathways why.

When we talk about the violent far right, it's a diverse group. You're not just talking about a single group, a single entity, a single organization, or a single ideology, or methodology, or how it's acted on, or how it is pushed out, or rolled out, or represented. It's quite different.

For those purposes, Life After Hate is concerned with trying to help the broader community understand where these different groups come from, how they think, and how they practice. Because more and more people are becoming interested in practicing in this space. Unfortunately, in this situation, one size does not fit all.

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12. See, e.g., Mark Berman, *Las Vegas Police End Investigation into Massacre Without 'Definitively' Determining What Motivated the Gunman*, WASH. POST (Aug. 3, 2018), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2018/08/03/las-vegas-police-end-investigation-into-massacre-without-definitively-determining-motive/>.

13. See *ADL Report Exposes Right-Wing Terrorism Threat in the U.S.*, ANTI-DEFAMATION LEAGUE (June 21, 2017), <https://chicago.adl.org/adl-report-exposes-right-wing-terrorism-threat-in-the-u-s/> ("ADL's research has found that from 2007 to 2016, a range of domestic extremists of all kinds were responsible for the deaths of at least 372 people across the country. Seventy-four percent of these murders came at the hands of right-wing extremists such as white supremacists, sovereign citizens, and militia adherents."); see also Kennett Werner, *White Supremacists Committed Most Extremist Killings in 2017, ADL Says*, NBC NEWS (Jan. 18, 2018, 8:07 PM), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/white-supremacists-committed-most-extremist-killings-2017-adl-says-n838896> (stating that eighteen out of thirty four violent incidents in 2017 can be attributed to white supremacist groups or individuals).

14. See Cory Collins, *The Miseducation of Dylann Roof*, TEACHING TOLERANCE (2017), <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/fall-2017/the-miseducation-of-dylann-roof>.



I would even go so far as to say that once you understand the ideology and the grievances coming from this population, standard approaches to counseling will only serve to trigger some of the long-held ideological images that they have about our society. And so we have to inform practitioners, inform NGOs and other social service providers, and inform law enforcement how we're framing the narrative when intervening in a way that is effective. Otherwise, you might find yourself working against yourself in some of these interventions and interactions that you have.

It's interesting, also, when we think about how we're perceiving criminality, gun crimes, and violence. In particular, what I found interesting is when you look at the statistics, no matter how you look at it, it remains and should remain a priority in our perspective to consider what is actually threatening our national security—what is threatening our people, what is threatening our communities, and even what is threatening our law enforcement officers.

### III. UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONDING TO VIOLENT BEHAVIORS

Now, of course, when you start diving into this realm, you can get really discouraged. When you're facing things as daunting as perhaps institutional racism, when you're talking about 400-500 years of oppression that people are still living with and living out here in this community but who are often dismissed as people who haven't decided to move on, as if the systems and mechanisms in place aren't still contributing to some of their downfall.

That doesn't mean that people aren't accountable for their actions. It just means that we know how to hold both conversations. In doing this work, you find yourself wondering if you can even make a difference. What can four or five of us, who decided to jump into this fight, do when we don't even have money, we don't have power, we don't have privilege, we don't have access to data or information that others do. What can we possibly do?

Well, last year in St. Louis, right before I accepted that U.N. award, I had the privilege of meeting a twenty-two-year-old German man who said that his great-grandparents were recruited by the local constable in Germany during World War II to hide and protect a Jewish family that was scheduled to be picked up and then later executed. This German family decided to take that risk on, and this German family was comprised of a husband, wife, and two small children. They operated a storefront that was also their home and that was also across the street from a police station. They hid this family of two adults and two children for two years. Eventually, they helped that family escape. Here's what that young man de-

terminated. He said, “I don’t know what I would’ve done if I were my great-grandparents. But what they did show me is what is possible.”

I think when we talk about what we’re doing here today, we have to consider what the possibilities are that can come out of these conversations. These are not pointless conversations. These are meaningful conversations. I would go as far as to say that we’re pioneering this segment of our population right now who is choosing to take on these issues. These are new conversations. In the long scheme of things, in the face of how long we’ve been dealing with this stuff, we’ve lived with racism for quite a long time. When I’m talking about dealing with it as a community, this to me is grassroots. These are people at this level who are starting to take an interest and starting to understand why this is important. You can no longer just assume it doesn’t affect you because it didn’t happen in your own backyard yet.

Oftentimes, we think about forgiveness in terms of what is forgivable and what isn’t. After hearing from some of the victims of these violent extremists’ attacks, you start to question these hard lines between what is and what isn’t forgivable.<sup>15</sup>

Think about Jo Berry.<sup>16</sup> She is standing next to the man who killed her father with an IRA bomb. They are now on the road building bridges to peace.

You have Robbie Donlin, who started the Parent Circle,<sup>17</sup> who is finding ways to heal families in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict by uniting families under one common cause: that both sides are losing their children to this 900-year-old battle. I don’t know if you’ve heard of Robbie, but she went to South Africa. There, one of the leaders of the Apartheid was trying to reconcile with some of the communities that suffered atrocities under his rule.

#### A. *And What’s Possible?*

We spent three days with someone who was trying to convince us that his perspective on life, that his narrative on life, was actually the way to go. Just to let you into a little bit of this window on his life, this young man and his brother were pretty hell-bent on convincing us that we had it wrong—about our perspective and about the world. Of those three days, we spent about ninety percent of

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15. See THE FORGIVENESS PROJECT, <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com> (last visited Apr. 14, 2019).

16. See *Jo Berry and Patrick Magee*, THE FORGIVENESS PROJECT, <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/jo-berry-patrick-magee> (last visited Apr. 14, 2019).

17. See *generally About PCFF*, THE PARENTS CIRCLE – FAMILIES E., [http://theparentscircle.org/en/about\\_eng/](http://theparentscircle.org/en/about_eng/) (last visited Apr. 14, 2019).

that time just listening. We didn't challenge his ideology. We didn't confront the ideology. We tried to listen from a place of wanting to understand so that then, when we did speak, we knew where we needed to come from in order to make a difference. When the youngest brother decided that he wanted to reconsider his life and his position, he took the lead. It also affected his brother and two of the girls that were also part of that group. All that it was, was an intervention that was not necessarily based on us saving anyone but in sharing space with someone in a different way.

The way we shared that space was enough to challenge the global narrative. Because they were showing us the ugliest parts they had to offer us, and we were never so disturbed that we wanted to start judging or start condemning or start proscribing. In fact, what we wanted to do was establish a relationship so that, by the time we were allowed or given permission to speak, it would actually mean something. After three days listening, we asked some critical questions that helped them challenge the decisions that they were making around their lives.

We didn't know what to do when the Las Vegas shooting happened. The country couldn't even determine what kind of incident this was. Was it terrorism? Was it an act of a mentally ill guy who was struggling with alcoholism? Nobody knew what to do. But I'll tell you what I have learned in this work. Even in the face of not knowing what to do, one of the ways you can help maintain a semblance of civility in our society is to bear witness when these atrocities happen. Sometimes showing up is the best thing you can do in the face of not knowing what to do. We did it at the Sikh temple, and now we are partners and close with the victims of that community. We've done it in Las Vegas as well. One of the reporters who was following us around said that what we were doing was much more important than just bearing witness because we were also inserting a narrative. We were bringing a message to that community that challenged the way that the community was absorbing and reacting to the situation. Really, we felt that was critical, so this is why we spend so much time thinking about how we deliver the message that we have.

### B. *Can People Change?*

Right now, we're living in a time where the pendulum is swinging to believe that members of white supremacy groups are irredeemable—that they cannot be saved, that they cannot be

changed. Oftentimes, we are seeking vengeance, or we're seeking, in some way, shape, or form, to just sweep this problem away.

Oftentimes, communities are so responsive to these issues from an emotive position that it overwhelms their better senses. When we are protesting, when we are in these counter-protests, it serves us to maintain, for lack of a better term, the so-called moral high ground—that we still honor and respect human rights, that we still honor and respect the peaceful side of these protests and this social activism—rather than giving way to that emotional appeal of wanting to, what we talked about earlier, punch people in the faces, which is what clearly happened.

I want you to pay attention to the picture down here.<sup>18</sup> Look at the smile on his face. The abuse and the harm of the attack that this white supremacist is enduring—does it seem to have the effect that we would hope for, coming out of the counter-protesting? Or is it helping him dig in? Is it helping him in his resolve to stay the course because we've just validated a narrative that leads to that type of radicalization, that type of ideology about society?

Now you can see all of that within this young man.<sup>19</sup> His name is Randy, and he has allowed us to share his story. Randy was on his way to watch a high-profile alt-right member speak at a college in Gainesville, Florida earlier this year. On the way there, he was late, and so he basically had to try to force his way through the protesters to try to gain entrance to the building on campus where this was happening. He ran into this wall and said that people were stabbing him with pins and needles. He was stabbed in his calves, his arms, his back, his butt, his stomach. They spit on him and punched him, and someone knocked out his tooth.

He never defended himself. He walked through this crowd with his hands by his side and showed no fear. He put a smile on his face, as you can see. It wasn't until one of the protesters took pity on him. The protester said, "I wanted to punch this guy. I did, I wanted to punch him, too. But there was something in me that knew that wasn't right." So, in this conflict, he decided to grab Randy, hug him, and shout in his ear, "Why do you hate me?"

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18. *Photos: Counter Demonstrators Drown Out White Nationalists at University of Florida Speech*, GAZETTE TIMES, (Oct. 19, 2017), [https://www.gazettetimes.com/news/national/govt-and-politics/photos-counter-demonstrators-drown-out-white-nationalists-at-university-of/collection\\_a80c4452-cf21-5acd-a6ee-4581252cde1d.html?utm\\_content=bufferd0c40&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=facebook.com&utm\\_campaign=LEEDCC#5](https://www.gazettetimes.com/news/national/govt-and-politics/photos-counter-demonstrators-drown-out-white-nationalists-at-university-of/collection_a80c4452-cf21-5acd-a6ee-4581252cde1d.html?utm_content=bufferd0c40&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=LEEDCC#5).

19. See Mary Hui, *A Black Protester Hugged a White Nationalist Outside Richard Spencer's Talk. 'Why Do You Hate Me?' He Asked.*, WASH. POST (Oct. 20, 2017), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2017/10/20/a-black-protester-hugged-a-white-nationalist-outside-richard-spencers-talk-why-do-you-hate-me-he-asked/>.

Randy can't explain his answer, but the answer he gave was, "I don't know." All the punching, all the attacks, and all the violence didn't shake him. But a simple question and an embrace did.

Here's what's most compelling about that event. On that day, he went to go see somebody that he was hoping would deliver a message about white supremacy to help him engrain it even further into his soul. And, at the end of that day, he walked away from white supremacy and into the arms of this man, and then later into our organization.

When you think about what we're exemplifying here, I believe it speaks to the importance of defeating our enemies with our own humanity—not necessarily with our intellects, our laws, or our terms or definitions. The humanistic approach cannot be underestimated in this field and in this work. Even as students who are taking on the law, even as practitioners who are trying to work in the space who defend civil rights, humanitarian components of ourselves must remain viable. We must advocate for that. In many ways, we cannot afford to adopt the values of the people that we feel we are different from and still consider ourselves to be different.

### *C. How Does That Happen Though?*

I believe we live in a time where people don't even want to listen because listening feels as if you're losing some part of the fight. It's as if your position becomes weaker because you listen to someone.

Much of what I have understood about this issue is really ego, in my opinion. The ego can't tolerate the difference. It's not because the ego is big. We often talk about ego in terms of somebody's ego being too big. I would say it's the opposite. I would say it comes from having too small of an ego. An ego that is so easily trampled over, so easily triggered, and so easily becomes the master to your heart and your mind, that it compels you to act outside of the realm of what would be true to yourself. When we listen, we are not necessarily conceding. When we choose to speak from that perspective, it doesn't have to include condemning anyone. You can condemn behaviors and actions and still preserve what's most important inside of each of us in here, which is our own humanity.

Part of the unforeseen consequences that we see fueling this new wave of self-proclaimed alt-right groups. There are a number of grievances coming out of these groups that help us understand where they're coming from. This becomes critical in trying to dismantle a narrative that is working against them and working against us. One of the major themes in these grievances is perhaps

an unforeseen consequence of the way we've been talking about activity in the last fifty years as it relates to civil rights. We've used terms in the classroom such as "white privilege" and "white guilt." Just as it was highlighted previously that there was a classroom full of people who had not heard of slavery, I was just on a campus on the East Coast who hadn't heard of Charlottesville. So we are not just talking about elementary or middle school students. We are talking about adults in a college learning environment. When we mentioned Charlottesville,<sup>20</sup> we saw blank stares. We were perplexed by that and asked if everyone knew what we were talking about. The room was about fifty-fifty.

We're focused on the impact that social media is having. This is a good example of how social media isn't necessarily fishing in an ocean. It's fishing out of a bucket. Depending on what you tell the algorithm that's paying attention to every keystroke that you make and every picture you pause on, that's what you'll get more of. If you're not plugged into these national issues or violent extremism, you won't be exposed to that because you don't open yourself up to that. We often feel like we have a much broader sense of the world than we actually do.

In part, what has happened here when we talk about these issues in certain ways, we're getting involved in something called collective shaming. We all know what it feels like to be a recipient of that, especially if you fall into that minority category. My family is Native American and Mexican from Texas. To listen to a national leader say that they send their rapists, their murderers, their drug dealers, their very worst here, that is collective shaming. The way we talk about Muslims or their religion is also collective shaming.

But the way we talk about racism, the way we say if you are white, you are inherently racist—that is not a position we take. It is not helpful to take that position. What it does is create shame, and when shame occurs, the brain does not function at its higher levels. Those are the levels we need people to access when we are having these types of conversations. These are necessary parts of conversations. We need to talk about privilege. We need to talk about accountability. We need to talk about these things, but we need to do it in a way that understands the impact of the words we use because these words matter.

As far as grievance go, this is a part of a trending grievance from the violent far right, saying, "We're now being judged by the color of our skin. We are now losing privilege. We are now losing

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20. See Joe Heim, *Recounting a Day of Rage, Hate, Violence and Death*, WASH. POST (Aug. 14, 2017), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/local/charlottesville-timeline/>.

access to education or access to jobs.” It doesn’t matter if you consider that to be a false comparison or an exaggerated point. It doesn’t matter what your position personally on that is. Without listening to that, you don’t know what you’re up against. You don’t know how to frame the intervention that is required to engage usefully in that space.

We have a network of close to 200 members in our support groups at Life After Hate. One of the common themes is that someone’s treatment of a Former was so different from the rest that it made them stop and think. If you sound like everyone else, if you look like everyone else, especially at these protests, if you become a part of the blur, you’re no different to the person looking across from whatever side you’re looking across from. There is no invitation to come, there is no welcoming source there. Just like with Randy and like with our group, people felt that when they were listened to, that somehow, they were being validated, that somehow, they mattered. Their opinion mattered, and their experience mattered. People need to feel validated in order to engage in a meaningful relationship with you.

#### D. *How Do We Know This?*

You go to a restaurant and ask the waiter, “What do you suggest?” The waiter says, “Well, we have a special with chicken and a special with fish.” You say, “Well, I think I’d like the fish.” Now typically, professionals in my field believe they actually know what’s best for people. So, they say, “Well actually, sir, I’m going to bring you the chicken.” Now, I know you heard what I had to say, but yet, I impose my opinion, my will, and my position of privilege on that. I use that position to try to have undue influence in this relationship. People know when that is happening. This is why listening without an agenda matters in this part of the work that we are doing because people want to have a genuine sense that you are actually listening to them and that you actually understand, even though you may not necessarily agree with them. And that part leads to the validation. A person can sense that you are genuinely involved in this moment with this person and therefore, in their mind, worthy of dialogue.

I would invite you to use some of the resources that I have developed over time, that I have been privileged to share. One of them is a TED Talk about forgiveness.<sup>21</sup> You all understand what

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21. TEDx Talks, *The Power of Forgiveness* | Sammy Rangel | TEDxDanubia, YOUTUBE (June 23, 2015), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOzJO6HRluA>.

I'm going to talk about in this video because, as I get through my life here a little bit further, you will understand why forgiveness played a crucial role in my life and why it has a crucial role in society today.

And I also want to talk about a twelve-step program that I started for men and women who are addicted to hate, violence, crime, or to street life.<sup>22</sup> This is a very different twelve-step approach than traditional because in most other models or twelve-step groups, it typically focuses on a substance. We're focusing on a lifestyle that is difficult to walk away from. This is currently being translated in Poland right now.

My book is not just my life story, those are a dime a dozen. In this book, I try to really spell out each phase of my life so that you can get an inside view of where my brain was working, where my emotions were working, and the impact the community and my family were having on me. I also really tried to spell out my change process, and that can be helpful for a person who's trying to change and for people who are in a position to help others to change.

In this work, we have to start paying attention to this narrative that we have. We've been talking about the narrative of violent extremism, but we're the ones who are trying to change this world. We are the ones trying to change that life, and so I think we have to start asking, "Who is writing our story? How do we come to the positions that we have?"

I would venture that in my life, some of my beliefs were inherited. My family had it, and so I just assumed that was the way to go until I was older. Then, I realized, "Wait a minute, there are more religions in the world than being Catholic!" Because I was raised Catholic, I had not been exposed to another religion. Then, around age twenty to twenty-one, I realized there are a million different religions. It led me to ask, "Why this one?" and "Why is this one better than the other one?" That led me down a dark hole, I just want you to know that.

And does the way we tell our story matter? If so, why do we tell it the way we do? Why do we talk about these things the way we talk about them from our position? What's influencing that?

If you're in a position of power, privilege, or authority, does the way you talk about your experience with yourself influence the outcomes?

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22. See *Formers Anonymous* (@FormersAnonymous), FACEBOOK, <https://www.facebook.com/FormersAnonymous/> (last visited Apr. 14, 2019).



If you're a therapist and you don't like the people you serve, you can justify actions that you take because the institution will teach you what it takes to write somebody off. I remember, we were doing welcome home meetings in a re-entry program I was running, and an officer from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives came for the first time. After listening to what he heard, he said "You know, I came here with the idea that I needed to do something to you, and I'm leaving here with the understanding that I need to do something for you." He shifted from being adversarial to having a deeper insight that was really rooted in compassion and empathy. This happened only after being exposed to a different part of humanity than the one he was used to seeing.

Does the way we talk about these issues bring us closer together or tear us further apart? The way we write laws—does it bring us together or tear us further apart?

In a nutshell, the first half of my life really sucked. The second half you get to see right now. When we received this United Nations award, it was a big deal for us because we're Formers: men and women who have once participated in extremist, criminal, violent lifestyles. And while in our own country, the rug was pulled out from under us, a global community who knew that we were Formers said, "We want to support you in the work that you do." Forest Whitaker introduced me to receive that award, and he said, "These guys are heroes." I got up there and said, "We're not heroes. But we do see ourselves as a necessary part of the conversation."

We bring with us a perspective that you cannot have other than by reading journals, statistics, or whatever reports the Southern Poverty Law Center or the Anti-Defamation League puts out. Otherwise, you don't really get to see what it's like through our eyes in this world. We're not just Formers; we're highly concerned with professional, personal, and educational development. We are carving ourselves out to be more than just people who were there at one point because we understand the complexity of the issues that we've chosen to take on. We want to pay respect to the importance and value of that work.

It's important that people feel that they're being cared for and in good hands. Not only do you have the academic or professional experience and skills, but you also understand people and care about that relationship with people. I'm going to be fifty next year, and my doctors' visits have changed significantly. Yes, they're quite intrusive. The last thing I want is someone to be treating me who has a cold heart and cold hands. Does that make sense? You know

when you leave that visit, whether it was one or the other. I've actually changed hospitals as a result of this.

We know what we say about pictures, a picture is worth ten thousand words. We know what we say about words, every word has five thousand meanings. What we don't say enough about is what behavior represents. This is an important aspect in this field that we need to take on because behavior is more than just a value judgment. It's an indicator. It's a symptom. It's evidence of something else. And unless you're curious enough to know what that is, you will simply stop at the value judgment component. I've seen enough to know enough to take action.

But what happens when we start to take our time to try to understand behavior? Well, you saw Randy, and we see the effect that this can have on others throughout our group and in other positions that I've held. But too often we're approaching the situation like it's a very simple idea. Even this morning, listening to other panels, I did that. I feel like I know enough about this topic to have an opinion, and yet, we are always reminded that it's much more complex. It's never just that simple. Behavior is not just that simple. I think we can approach this problem completely differently if we understand that behavior actually means something other than a person is good or bad. It means much more than that.

#### IV. SAMMY RANGEL SHARES HIS LIFE EXPERIENCES

A news article spelled out that my mother beat my little brother Rene with a Tonka truck. His skull was fractured. His body was a mass of bruises. He was bleeding from different places on his body. And he was in and out of consciousness. This happened on January 5, 1969. My mother was five months pregnant with me at that time. Later, both my sister and I were left in the care of my mother, although my brother Rene was removed from the home.

Our family went on to experience more of the same type of abuse: physical and sexual. We could talk about all the other types because they were all a part of that. Do you consider beating a child, a toddler, with a Tonka truck abuse? Or is there some other word that I haven't thought of yet to explain what that is?

When I was old enough to be in school, and I was also old enough to start getting noticed in school, my report cards and my parent teacher conferences were starting to spell out that I was a behavioral problem. I couldn't sit still. I needed to use the bathroom too much. I raised my hand at inappropriate times. I blurted out the answers, et cetera, et cetera. I also had a speech impediment, so I was put into speech classes. So, I had behavioral disabili-

ties, I had emotional disabilities, and I had a speech disability. So far, no one asked the question of why.

My parents sent me to this corner store quite often. Going to this corner store was kind of like a reprieve from what was happening at home. I was always eager to go to the corner store. I could get away from the family long enough to have a little bit of freedom from all of that. But unfortunately, I started stealing when I went to the store. I would steal these little pecan pies. Back in those days, I think the pecan pies cost about a nickel apiece. I think they're like fifty cents today. I did this for most of the summer, and then one day while trying to throw a wrapper behind the milk, somebody from behind the milk grabbed me and started screaming. I started screaming, and a bunch of the store employees, like SWAT, jumped out and piled up on top of me. They picked me up and marched me to the back of a room that was like an office. On this board somebody had taken the time to draw a calendar, and it had little X's on the days they must have found the wrappers. On the top of this board, it had a villain name. It said "The Pecan Bandit Strikes Again!" Next to that was an eighty-nine-dollar tally of pecan pies. Now, I'm not downing any geeks in the audience, but I do not care to know how many nickels that is. Imagine what happened to me when I went home. But then imagine what I looked like the next day at school.

At thirteen or fourteen years old, I had been a homeless, throw-away, runaway youth for about three years. I buried my first child at the age of eleven. I tried just about every substance that was in the neighborhood at that time. I was in a gang, and I was violent, but not necessarily considering myself violent yet. I had violent behavior, more or less from a survival perspective, but I hadn't gotten to the point where violence was my language yet.

One day, I had been arrested and brought back home. My parents marched us into the living room. My mom sat between my siblings. My father forced me to my knees and stood on the back of my knees. He held my arms behind my back. My mother was trying to force me to tell my brothers that the reason I would run away from home—the reason I'd stay away from home—was because I didn't love them. Now by this age, thirteen or fourteen years old, I'm a fighter now, I'm fighting. Running away was, in the beginning, how I fought. I was challenging my parents. But now, I'm verbally challenging my parents. I would fight back, and I would say, "I do these things because of what you're doing to us right now." Even then, I knew it was happening to us, not just to me. My mother hit me in the face with a purple Avon brush. We did this for the better part of thirty minutes, until I had to give in. But I

want you to know what happened when I had to say those words: something in my brain snapped. Now I go from being homeless, and scared, and fighting to protect myself, to angry, enraged, and now wanting to take out my feelings through anger and violence.

I find myself, at seventeen-years old, in a maximum-security prison called Menard Correctional in southern Illinois. I walked into a brewing race riot. When I say race riot, I mean what you see pictured in the movies like *American Me*. Whites against Blacks, and of course, Hispanics and Native Americans sided with the Blacks.

In this particular prison, it was the only prison that was a stronghold for white supremacists. The lead group at that time was the Aryan Nation Brotherhood. The Aryan Nation had created a prison group. But they wouldn't recruit from within prison. Instead, they would create these subgroups where, if you were white, you were either forced or by choice would enter. Then you were sent through a process of prospecting, so you were beat up, brutalized, and put through the ringer to test if you could muster enough strength and courage to stay among the ranks.

When this race riot kicked off, we were outnumbered; it was approximately ten to one. I was actually separated from my group of about ten, when the guard started shooting. When the guards started shooting at us, I actually went the wrong way and cornered myself against a wall among the white supremacists. My group was on the other side of that. I knew what was going to happen as soon as that happened. As soon as the guard turned his attention to shoot somewhere else, these men would attack me. We were all armed with knives, sticks, mop buckets, stools, anything that wasn't nailed to the floor or welded to the gate.

A young, Black male, who I barely knew, saw my predicament. He rushed in to try to save me. The fighting started again, and when the officer came back in, it was me, armed with two knives, this Black man who was fighting with his fists, and about twenty white supremacists. The guard shot the Black man.<sup>23</sup>

The fighting stopped. I was next to numb. Just no emotion, no feeling, or sense of fear. Maybe I was in shock. Looking back on it, I don't know. I can remember the guard threatening to shoot me if I were to touch the man who he had just shot. But I couldn't leave him there. If I escaped and left him there, those men would have dragged him in the cell and tortured him, maimed him. So, I dragged that man 150 cells—from one end of the prison to the

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23. See *1 Inmate Killed by Guards During Racial Riot at Prison*, *Deseret News* (Sept. 27, 1989, 12:00 AM), <https://www.deseretnews.com/article/65612/1-INMATE-KILLED-BY-GUARDS-DURING-RACIAL-RIOT-AT-PRISON.html> (describing the riot experienced by Mr. Rangel at Menard Correctional Center).

other. By the time I got to the other end of the cell hall, under the guard who was bearing down with his weapon on me, a superintendent came in. He is the one who is referenced in here, whose jaw was broken. I asked if we could get him to the hospital, and the superintendent said, “No one’s coming in and no one is going out.” You can guess what that means for this guy, who’s screaming, who’s bleeding out of the side of his body, who’s begging me to help him, who’s begging me to get a message to his mother. I started fighting with that man, and as a result, it kicked off another wave of fighting. This time it was inmates with guards. We overpowered the guards, took over the cell hall, and forced our way to the inmate hospital through several different gates.

Obviously, the man died. And as a result of my behavior, I spent the next twenty-eight months in segregation and was virtually paroled from segregation. But in those twenty-eight months, something happened. I was next to older men who had witnessed what had happened. All of them were in gangs. Some of these men were Vice Lords and Four Corner Hustlers. And in that particular day and age, a lot of those sides of the gangs were also Muslims. Then you had the Hispanic side of the gangs, who were usually Catholic.

But in those twenty-eight months, I was fed information about racism and institutional racism. I was taught language, and I was given what we now call an “ideology,” what we now call a process of “radicalization.” I was haphazardly flowing through life, making a series of bad decisions that ended me up at this institution at seventeen years old. I was really just trying to escape the beatings my parents were weighing down on me. I was trying to get away from the institutions that felt I needed to be locked up. But it wasn’t until this incident that I was actually taught to hate, solely based on the color of your skin and, of course, a very hard messaging centering around being anti-government. It was hard to argue with that messaging, with what I had just observed and experienced.

In that time frame, my children were born—my daughter and my son. Here’s where you might come in. I get out of prison, and within seven months, I’m going back to prison for what we would now probably call “hate crimes.” I was targeting Whites at this point in my life. Now imagine being either the prosecutor or the defense attorney facing this guy, and what you see is the file, the image, the behavior.

V. THE NEED FOR HUMANITY  
ROOTED IN COMPASSION AND EMPATHY

We need a certain amount of space to feel safe. We need a certain amount of mental and emotional resources to hold ourselves safe, to be able to respond appropriately when things are coming at us in life. There's this expectation that your brain will go back to normal when those events pass. But what happens when your brain doesn't work that way anymore?

Is it as simple as changing your behavior at this point? Or is there a very real component of injury that happens as a result of traumatic experiences? And this is not about whether or not I put myself in a situation where I deserved to be. It's about the effects of the situations I found myself in. There are real effects, whether they're intended, deserved, or not.

The bigger issue is that, as we run into segments of our population in our communities, these individual groups—these silos—often think they know enough about you to reach a conclusion about you. At the age of twenty-two, by a Department of Corrections psychiatrist, I was deemed irredeemable. Think about that: irredeemable at twenty-two. This man should be written off as incorrigible and someone who cannot change. Nobody was asking the questions that needed to be asked yet.

In our field, in our positions today, it's not so much how we listen to others that shapes our narrative, but how we listen to ourselves and the ideas, thoughts, and opinions that we have about certain things, including ourselves. But what if we were to actually see the best in people, regardless of what they present? To know that humanity still exists in a person who seems incorrigible.

What if, along the way, any one of these institutions or systems had the ability to do that with me? In these complex situations, when we are concerned enough to want to connect the dots—and see that's the difference—we have to desire. We have to pursue. We have to have this sense of urgency to want to understand. When you have that sense of urgency, you are operating from the most precious parts that define who we are as people. That is from your humanity, rooted in compassion and empathy, which is not implying a lack of accountability or responsibility for anyone involved.

I never gave up. And what I'm spending most of my time doing in my role is teaching others not to give up on others. Teaching that we cannot afford to reach a position in our lives where we feel completely hopeless about a person or population we face. Even in the face of what we would call "resistance" or "hatred," we are bet-

ter served by trying to understand what this person means by all of that. What is their grievance? Because then, from there, I can activate myself from an informed position.

But so often, we can't get past the problem. We have a limited view on how we perceive this problem—so much so that we don't realize that there are quite often simple, not easy, but simple solutions to some of the things that we are experiencing and doing ourselves.

Aside from theory, research says that your approach is what makes the difference in helping someone change their behavior, not your theory. Your research, we need it. But that's not what is behind it. Numbers and analytics in the wrong hands—well, we know what that does. But in the right hands, it wields power.

We can no longer say that we would do better in the face of having better enemies or better antagonists. We cannot. We have to hold ourselves to a standard of staying true to ourselves, staying true to our humanity, and honoring the humanity in others. In part, you have to do this by trying to listen to the bigger picture being expressed. What is that bigger picture? Where is this person's bigger global narrative coming from?

Typically, if you listen long enough, you can start to find some of the indicators that might actually help you become better at providing a service and spending some time with the group, where you actually make a difference without force and without judgment.

#### A. *We Have to Ask Ourselves, What Is the Dominant Theme?*

If our egos are in the way, if our judgment clouds our vision, the resistance you're feeling may be your own—not necessarily the person that you are serving. You are resistant to their resistance. That creates a clog in the wheel. It doesn't allow the system to operate if you can't overcome that. We can't attempt to try to pull people to our side. You get caught up in this power struggle—holding your position—when in reality, changing the way you perceive your involvement in the situation can really go a long way.

In essence, I think where a lot of us get caught up is that we think we have power over people.

All you can do is influence. All you can do is cast a light or a shadow onto somebody's life. But you do not actually have power and control over people. You might be able to lock them up. You might be able to court order them to do this or that. But to get to genuine change inside of someone, you have to respect their dignity. You have to respect their humanity. You have to come and op-

erate from a place of compassion and empathy—not for their crimes, but for their suffering.

Because hatred is a form of suffering. We cannot hate them out of that hate. We cannot lock them up out of that hate. To be honest, we can only love them out of that hate. That doesn't necessarily mean that I'm asking you to go hug anyone. I'm saying, in your practice, in your principles, in your approach, come from a place of love, come from a place of compassion, and come from a place of empathy for all parties concerned. If you can do that, then you get to a point very quickly where you realize condemning people as people is really a set-up for your own failure in this effort and in this movement.

### B. *Changing the Narrative*

I was told my brother was dead. I found out that he was alive. In that same year, I also found my daughter, who I had been separated from for twenty-two years. My daughter said that there was nothing to forgive because she had seen the value in the changes that I had made. My brother, alternatively, who also had a difficult life as you've heard, said, "I'm glad I wasn't you."

In the end, we have to maintain this position of hope. It's more than just an idea. It's a necessity, especially in dark times. Your ability to hold hope is what will inspire others through these dark times. What you are doing here, the privilege you have here, through this education, through this beautiful campus environment that you're in, is to take what you have, and if you're so inclined, lend your privilege to others who might need it.

Thank you very much. I appreciate your time.



