British Columbia's
Office of the Human Rights Commissioner

Inquiry into hate in the pandemic: Hearing transcript

Transcription prepared by BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner

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Presenting organizations: The Cure for Hate

[ORGNAME] attendees: Tony McAleer

BCOHRC[1] attendees: Human Rights Commissioner Kasari Govender, Camelia Bhatti, Sarah Khan

Please note that third-party personal information has been removed from this transcript.

[Introductory comments by Human Rights Commissioner Kasari Govender not included in transcript.]

Tony McAleer: Thank you. Thank you for having me, and I also want to recognize that I'm speaking to you from the unceded territories of the Coast Salish people and the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh people.

So just to preface before I start up, I'm thinking I'm going to make my presentation a little bit shorter. I could talk for hours on this stuff, and I've got your questions that you want help answering, but I think you asking me more questions will help you get to the information that's most suited to your needs. And I'm happy here to do that, and I'm your humble servant.

I also want you to know that there is no question that I won't honestly answer. There's nothing too personal. If you're thinking, "Should I ask that question? Should I not ask that question," ask it. I'm here as an open book and as a resource for you to gain knowledge and understanding about this important and difficult topic.

So, I'm just going to start with a two-minute video that'll give you a little bit of my background. Can you hear that?

Camellia Bhatti: No.

[1] BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner

Tony McAleer: Okay. I need to… I don't know exactly what that is.

Camellia Bhatti: Yeah, sometimes when you share your screen you just have to click that little "Share Sound" button as well.

Tony McAleer (video narrator): 20 years ago, I was a fervent neo-Nazi and Holocaust denier.

Tony McAleer (interviewed in video): I believe there are differences between the races. If that makes me a racist, then I'm a racist.

Tony McAleer (video narrator): It's a life I've long left behind, but I continue to struggle with the shame I carry from my role in contributing to such a dark legacy. A legacy that continues today. The violence and murder the white supremacist movement fantasized about all those years ago, the violence I once advocated and encouraged, have now become a horrific reality as acts of racially-motivated terrorism have increasingly become the norm.

Somebody asked me once, "How did you lose your humanity?" "I didn't lose it," I replied. "I traded it for acceptance and approval, until there was nothing left."

My pathway back has been a long, lonely, and difficult one, and over the past several decades I've sought ways to deepen my commitment to the work against racism, antiSemitism, and white nationalism.

Tony McAleer (interviewed in video): And that spark started a process, it was not an event, it didn't happen overnight, where my heart thawed and began to open up, and I began to rediscover my own humanity.

Tony McAleer (video narrator): Most importantly, I've sought to find ways to use my own experience to help others exit hate groups, including helping to found Life After Hate, as well as shed a light on what leads people down the path of violent extremism and how to prevent it.

Tony McAleer (interviewed in video): The source of all of my discomfort and unhappiness was external.

Tony McAleer: So, I just want to briefly go into how I got into that movement. I don't think anybody comes into the world as a neo-Nazi. As young children, if I think back to who I was, I was this curious, mischievous, stubborn, sensitive, bright, open-to-the-world little fellow, and life happens to us and we learn as a survival skill not to be open, not to be curious, to put up walls to prevent ourselves from being emotionally hurt and harmed. And that's what happened to me.

I just want to be very clear here, I'm going to share here some stuff from my childhood, I don't ever blame anything that I did on my childhood. Everything I did I chose to do, and I have to accept responsibility and accountability for that, and that's why I do the work that I do. But I share them with you so you can understand the lens through which I made those choices.

And when I was 10, I walked in on my father with another woman. That really rocked my world, left me very angry, confused, ashamed, and at school I went from an A-B student to a C-D student. And it was an all-boys Catholic school with corporal punishment, and they decided they were going to beat the grades into me.

And every time I was in that office getting hit on the rear end with a meter stick, I don't think to this day I've ever felt more powerless than I did in that office, over and over and over again. And that led me to act out at school. It didn't fix the problem, it made things worse, and I went from listening to Elton John and Queen to The Clash and The Sex Pistols and listening to angry music because that's what I was. My whole vibe was anger.

And I sort of got involved with skinheads out of the punk scene and then started to get involved with far-right groups, and went from being a young man, just a skinhead, to a leader, an organizer and recruiter. So, I know exactly how these groups operated, and I know what makes young people vulnerable.

And research really shows this out. So, I think the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism found in their research that the number one correlated factor in the history of someone joining a violence extremist group is childhood trauma. And they were talking specifically physical and sexual trauma.

Another recent study done showed that, I think, 15% of the general population has two adverse childhood events in their history. The average person involved in these far-right extremist groups has four. 66% has four. So, there's definitely a correlation between those events.

So, what is it that those events do? What are the vulnerabilities that are created? Because these groups, not everyone is susceptible to the ideology. And I think a common misconception is that ideology is the number one driver. Ideology is actually, I believe, secondary. Ideology's the pill you have to swallow in order to get community, a sense of purpose, a sense of power, acceptance, brotherhood or sisterhood. And it's not the number one important thing.

And you'll often find that people, when they leave these movements, go in search of those things and find themselves elsewhere. It's a quite common story that I've heard of people leaving the groups I was involved with and became enforcers in motorcycle gangs and things like that.

So at the root of it, I believe, is toxic shame. And trauma leaves us with a belief system that forms part of our identity. We pick up the belief that we aren't lovable enough, we aren't smart enough, that we're powerless and weak. And we go out into the world, and we live our lives in reaction to that.

And I think a great example I can give to you is if we look at Donald Trump. So when I heard that he didn't drink and his brother drank and died of a drug overdose, when I listen to his rhetoric about being the best at this and the best dealmaker, and everything was a zero-sum game, there has to be a winner, there has to be a loser, I work backwards from that. And the opposite of that belief is that he's weak, he's powerless, he's not great, he constantly has to project to the world that he is.

And I said to myself, I bet you I if go into his family history, there's an extremely abusive alcoholic parent. And lo and behold, it's his father who set him up. It's not an excuse. The things I'm sharing with you are in no ways meant to be an excuse, but it's to help provide understanding because understanding is the foundation for healing.

And so, what I got from being in the movement is I got acceptance when I felt unlovable, I got attention when I felt invisible, and I got power when I felt powerless. And I wasn't a tough kid growing up. I was a soft middle-class kid. Went to private school, my family was a doctor, and I grew up in Vancouver on the

west side in Dunbar. Hardly the mold. And what terrified me about these guys is their capacity for violence, which I took as power.

And to be with them and around them and have them support me made me feel very powerful, incredibly powerful. And it's obviously a misplaced sense of power, but coming from that place of powerlessness, it was incredibly soothing. And it makes no rational sense, but I felt safe with them. And in order to have their protection I had to have their respect. And in order to have their respect I had to commit all the same violence that they did.

And people were afraid of me because of them, but that made me feel powerful. And the further I got into my activities and attention-seeking and all of that, being on TV and in the papers at the time, the more notoriety I got, the more power I felt. And it's intoxicating, and I'd say that there's an element of addiction to it. It's very difficult to give up.

So that's sort of how I got into it. And everybody's lived experience is different, but there's common themes that exist when people join these groups. And I've heard story after story after story, and the roots always end up being there's these adverse childhood events.

And toxic shame doesn't just express itself in hate groups. Toxic shame is behind violenc. I'll just quickly delineate between toxic shame and healthy shame. Healthy shame is, "I did that. I did wrong." Toxic shame is, "I am that. I am wrong." It's the same thing driving people that join gangs, it's the same thing for extremist groups, it's also behind addiction, eating disorders, and a whole host of events.

And I bring that up because when looking at ways to mitigate or build resilience in young people and in communities, if we can look at dealing with toxic shame, we also look at mitigating a whole spectrum of antisocial outcomes that young people can and do experience.

What led me out of it? I would have to say compassion. Receiving compassion from someone who I felt I didn't deserve it from. The first compassion I received was from my children. I was a single father with two kids. And when we're compassionate with someone, we hold a mirror up to them and allow them to see their humanity reflected back at them when they can't see it themselves. And so my first experience of that was with my children.

And in 2011 I was at a conference, that's where Life After Hate was cofounded, put on by Google Ideas called the Summit Against Violent Extremism. And they brought in 50 former violent extremists from around the planet. You had the IRA and the Protestant Ulster Volunteer Force, you had Mujahideen, Red Brigade, you had Bloods, Crips, South America…

It transcended nationality, it transcended faith, it transcended gender, it transcended class, to look at what draws people into these movements and what gets people out. And the same thing I heard over and over and over talking to these different people from all these different backgrounds is the brotherhood, the community, the sense of purpose. And they've described it, part of the lure of ISIS is going from zero to hero. That young people don't have any future, they don't have anything going on, and they can be insignificant and take on a heroic identity.

And toxic masculinity definitely plays the role of this, and they get drawn into it. And the same thing happened when I asked them, How did you get out of it? Invariably there was… Birth of a child was a big

one, and I think it's the compassion that we receive. Because children are safe to love. They're not capable of shaming, ridicule, or rejection when they're young, so we can let down the armour. And I was completely in my head, completely narcissistic and cut off from my heart, and my children opened that up.

I'd say my mother who never gave up on me, her love for me was unconditional but her relationship with me was very conditional. And it brings me to a second point about compassion, is when we look at a compassionate approach it's… I want to say here we clearly have to have compassion for the victims of hate and hate crimes, but compassion when it's combined with healthy boundaries and consequences is a very powerful combination.

And thirdly, later when I met a counsellor who ironically was Jewish, receiving compassion… If this man could learn to love me, why couldn't I learn to love myself? Knowing that I once advocated for the annihilation of him and his people. It was a very, very powerful moment for me, and it's something that in Life After Hate we have used to great effect. And I'm not saying here for a second, it's the responsibility of marginalized people or people of color to hug a Nazi, so to speak, but it's an incredibly powerful gift for someone if they choose to give it.

And these are very transformational experiences, and we had a situation in Life After Hate where a young man, he'd been in Iraq and Afghanistan and seen his friends blown up by IEDs, and he hated Muslims. And he was calling us, and he was starting to have ideations of harming the local Muslim center. And very early on in that process we had two people go and visit him. And long story short, we asked if the Imam at that center would be willing to see him, and he said, "Well, maybe I've got 15 minutes tomorrow."

They took him there and they spent two hours together, and it ended up in crying and hugs. And that Muslim center became an important piece of his healing and work going forward. And so, these radical transformations… And I'm showing you really radical approaches to show the power of compassion, it doesn't have to be that radical.

There's a program in Orange County, and it was called A Million Acts of Kindness, and they found that by challenging people in the community to do these million acts of kindness, within three months I think bullying was down 50%. When we can treat people with humanity and spread that, it helps to inoculate from the effects of toxic shame. The antidote to toxic shame is, in fact, compassion. If shame is feeling less than human, and compassion helps people feel human, it's sort of the antidote.

Let me see what other questions… I want to just quickly address the hatred during the pandemic. What we found in the research is people were spending an awful lot more time online. And in that space, the internet has definitely been a game changer. When I was recruiting, the internet had only sort of just come out, but it took months if not years to radicalize a person. But with technology and social media now, people can radicalize in a weekend. You can binge watch an ideology. The speed governor on your radicalization really is the speed at which you can process information.

And part of it… It's important is the information that's available, but it's more the social networks, the communities that exist online that I think make it more dangerous. If Dylann Roof would not connected with other people within those networks, would he have gone as far? It's a question to ask. And he started with just a simple Black on white crime and ended up where he did.

I think the number of people that have radicalized and never met another human being that's radicalized is very, very, very low. I think some starting to exist, but the challenge with social media is you can find a community of whatever it is that you're into, and it's these social networks.

And they're very difficult to suppress. I think when you get to what are the solutions, suppression is a difficult one, because I know from… We were involved at Life After Hate in a number of research programs, and as Facebook and other tech giants started to suppress and push these things, they didn't disappear. Because they're not on Facebook or not on YouTube, it doesn't mean they disappear. They just go in harder and harder places to reach, harder and harder places to monitor.

I know it was becoming increasingly difficult for researchers to do research, because they then got on to more secure, encrypted platforms, and harder to get at. There is an advantage to having it out in the open where you can see it and you can deal with it. So there's cost-benefit analysis to consider there, and what are the unintended consequences?

Myself, I was the subject of two Canadian Human Rights Commission complaints that went to Tribunal in '91 and '93, I think it was, for the operation of the Canadian Liberty Net telephone line. So I know what it's like being on the other end of it. I was able to raise a lot of money because of the publicity and the case against me.

So there's things to consider, and I think suppression needs to be used delicately and with a scalpel as opposed to using it a little bit more bluntly, because of the unintended consequences which can in some cases make the situation worse.

There's no simple solution to dealing with online hate. I think the strongest way is to build more resilient communities. It would be the route I would choose. But there is definitely some things that need to be done, and mitigation, to me is more effective than suppression.

How am I doing for time?

Sarah Khan: You have about seven more minutes, I think, before we move into questions.

Kasari Govender: Unless you want us [crosstalk]-

Sarah Khan: Or a bit… Yeah. [crosstalk] It's totally up to you if you want to use all of the time, or however you'd like to proceed is fine with us.

Tony McAleer: Why don't we move into questions, because like I said, there's so much I can cover here, and I know your focus is a lot more narrow than the information I have to give you. So, let's see if we can focus in and answer some of the more specific questions you guys might have.

Kasari Govender: Sure. Thank you so much, Tony, it's really… I don't know what the right word is, if it's a privilege to listen to you, but it feels like that. I'm grateful that we're able to learn from your experience, and your journey, and your learnings along the way. So I have a number of questions, and then Sarah, I'll pass it over to you if that works for you.

Where to start here? Maybe I'll just start at the end. You talked about needing to use a scalpel and be really precise given the potential to drive hate underground, or at least that's what I understood your recommendation to be. And I think you were speaking particularly about online hate and the networks of online hate.

So, I have two related questions. One is, do you have any recommendations for what that scalpel could be used for? Do you have anything that's really precise and specific around how to deal with networks of hate online?

And then the second one is that you talked about your main recommendation would be the strongest way is to build more resilient communities, so I wondered if you had more that you could talk about there.

Tony McAleer: Yeah, with the more resilient communities, for example, I'm working with a group out of the US called Muflehun founded by Humera Khan, and she sat on the board to Life After Hate and we're actually doing a pilot program in British Columbia. We've applied for a grant with Public Safety. But they, for example, use data analytics to see what's going on in a city.

And there's certain patterns that emerge that signal… How do I say this? The environment for radicalization has become ripe. And so that communities can deploy… There's not an unlimited budget that cities have for social programs. And these social programs aren't meant to target kids that might be radicalizing but understanding that the environment is ripe for it to get in programs which are building resiliency in young people and youth programs and things like that to sort of head them off before they get there.

I know data analytics and preventative, it sounds Minority Report-ish, but it's using all open-source information and we're not talking about… Nobody's targeted individually, nobody's targeted as an extremist or potential extremist. It's not meant to do that, what it's meant to do is sort of raise just warning lights in areas where communities can enhance or deploy programs to counter that.

So, any in program that can help young people deal with being young people, that all very much helps. I think bystander and upstanders training is important. So, I think being able to, in a safe and healthy way, call this stuff out when people see it.

And I think in terms of things that make it worse, if shame is at the root of a lot of this, shame certainly can't be the solution. And some responses to this is to ostracize, shame groups of people that are misunderstood, and it's challenging, right? Because often these people have a legitimate grievance. Where they decide to go with their grievance is bonkers. Right?

But if you dehumanize them for feeling aggrieved when we don't think they should feel aggrieved, feelings are something that are very subjective, and whatever it is, it's real to them whether its legitimate or not. We run the risk of driving them further into radicalization or driving people into radicalization that maybe weren't that susceptible. We have to be very careful with the language and approach.

And the line I think best describes it, it's "it's important to call people out, but we must be prepared to call people in."

Kasari Govender: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Absolutely.

Tony McAleer: And as far as specific recommendations, can I get back to you with that? Can I also [crosstalk]

Kasari Govender: Yeah, absolutely.

Tony McAleer: In writing?

Kasari Govender: Yeah.

Tony McAleer: You have to be careful, because if you do suppression too much, and you suppress material of groups that are not your intended targets, the blowback can be significant, and it becomes a recruiting… "They're trying to silence you," and all that kind of stuff. And, "Look at this example over here." So, you just want to be very careful and very thoughtful as to the material that you're trying to suppress.

Kasari Govender: Yeah, I really appreciate that, and it's a conundrum in terms of the recommendations that we might make. So, if you do have thoughts on those specific pieces, and I wonder if your conversation around belonging and what led you down that path and the learnings you've had might contribute to those recommendations. So anything you have for us there in writing is wonderful.

We'll talk about this in a few minutes, but we're accepting written submissions until the end of March. So, you're really welcome [crosstalk].

Tony McAleer: OK. Because here's an example. Some of these groups now are on platforms where they've created a platform and it's their side hustle. It's two guys in Poland, I think one of them is two guys in Poland and it's a side hustle. They don't have the ability to monitor or curate what's happening in the social networks. Facebook barely does, and they've got 50,000 employees.

Kasari Govender: Yeah.

Tony McAleer: So, when you think of the limitations, I've been to Facebook and Google, and we've worked with Reddit, and understanding when we worked with Reddit, they maybe only had 50 employees. But all this stuff is happening on Reddit discussion boards. Reddit's a… Everyone know what Reddit is?

Kasari Govender: Yeah.

Tony McAleer: Yeah. So, it's how do they manage the requests when they don't have the resources? And there's an organization called GIFCT, can't remember what that stands for at the moment, but they sort of support social media companies behind the scenes. And what's happening on one… It's like a global resource for those tech companies.

And things like images that are banned, they can ban them across platforms. There's ways to get around that, but we don't want to get bogged down in those details. But there are some tech resources out there that you might want to… I can put those in there.

Kasari Govender: That would be great. Thank you.

Sarah Khan: Yes, that would be great. Sorry to interrupt both of you, I was just wondering if you could spell that, the name of the organization.

Tony McAleer: G-I-F-C-T.

Sarah Khan: Thank you.

Kasari Govender: Thank you. You talked about how ideology is secondary and how that sense of powerlessness came first. Can you draw out for us a bit more about that connection? How do you get from…? Or maybe how did you get or how did you see others get from powerlessness to ideology?

Tony McAleer: It was one step at a time. And in the video, somebody asked me, "Tony, how did you lose your humanity?" And the answer to that is, "I traded it for acceptance and approval until there was nothing left."

The more hardcore I became, the more people patted me on the back, the more recognition I got. My association with and committing the violence that I had committed, that built a reputation.

And what happened with me, and where it gets really difficult, is when the ideology… And it doesn't happen for everyone, some people, they wear it like a coat. But the ideology became my identity. It wasn't just what I believed, it was who I was. I was what I watched, what I read, what I listened to. It was the books I read, the people I hung out with.

And when it's in that place of identity, when ideology and identity become intertwined, then it's much more difficult to deal with. Because any time you go in and try and… "What do I say to my uncle, or my cousin, or whatever, the dinner table? What facts can I tell him to convince him that he's wrong?" I said, nothing. You can't convince him that he's wrong, because what you're trying to do is convince him that who he is is wrong. And nobody wants to admit that.

And ego will jump through all kinds of gymnastics to defend itself against those attacks, so you kind of have to separate identity from ideology. So going in through the head, going in through trying to deal with the ideology directly, since it's all kind of irrational to begin with there is no rational way to get through to someone.

But where you can get through is go in through the heart. The ego really doesn't have any defense there. And so, what I mean by that is, I believe that the level to which we dehumanize other human beings is a mirror reflection of our own internal disconnection and dehumanization.

If we can teach… The work that we did at Life After Hate and research shows us in the process of humanizing them… And for me, the more I got in touch with my own humanity, the more I connected to my own humanity coming from that place of total disconnection, the more I was able to recognize humanity in other people.

And so in order to heal that person's view of the world out there, we actually have to help them heal their view of the world inside them. And it's counter-intuitive, but if we heal the self, then you heal the world. And going out into the world and healing the world also heals the self.

I always say if we have compassion for others but not ourselves, that's not really compassion. That's about ego, that's about being seen to be compassionate. If we have compassion for ourselves but nobody else,

that's narcissism. And for compassion to truly thrive, it has to be balanced. We have to have compassion for ourselves and compassion for out there.

And have I got to compassion for self? That's a whole discussion in and of itself. It's one of the most difficult things I ever had to do, because I didn't feel I deserved it. So the hardest thing in the world is to have compassion for someone who has no compassion. But perhaps they're sometimes the people that need it the most.

Kasari Govender: You were talking I think at one point about the Cure for Hate, and then at one point the Life After Hate. Can you tell us the connection there? What's the structure of the work that you work in?

Tony McAleer: So, Life After Hate is an NGO based out of Chicago that I was cofounder of. And I was there, I was Executive Director and Board Chair at different times until December 2019, so I was there for almost 10 years. The Cure for Hate is the name of the book I wrote.

Kasari Govender: Ah, OK, I'm sorry. I wondered about that. OK.

Tony McAleer: "A former white supremacist's journey from extremism to radical compassion." And then so I have a consulting group around that where… Life After Hate does great work, and I recommend people to them and that, but I wanted to take my practice and understanding beyond that. So, I help other organizations, give them the knowledge and understanding to own what they're doing.

The way to make things scalable is to give other people knowledge. I think I came to the conclusion that Life After Hate as an organization, there's not possible way we're able to scale to meet the demand, it's far too great. But we don't need to meet the demand. What we did is provided proof of concept. And the organization is still going and counselling and hiring, training people to do the work, and they're doing exceptional work.

But if we look at things like counsellors and therapists and social workers, they've got the modality to work with extremism, just most of them don't know it. It just takes a little bit of cultural competency, because you peel back the layer of the swastika and you're dealing with family dynamics, and trauma, and addiction issues and all that kind of stuff which they don't recognize at the front because they're fixated on the swastika.

So training people who are in that space, whether they be counsellors at school or social workers or something. And there's enough resources in society to bring to bear to deal with it. They just need to know that they have the capability to work in that space. That's how we make it scalable, not by having formers talk to other people. That make sense?

Kasari Govender: Yeah, it does, thank you. You talked about the Google forum. One, I just wondered if there was a report from that forum. But more substantively, you talked about some of the commonalities of people from so many different kinds of groups, and you said it crosses faiths, it crosses geographies. Did you see any qualitative differences there that you could identify? Would you describe the cause of all the hate that you saw there, the extremism that you saw there, in the same way?

Tony McAleer: From my perspective, shame shows up in different ways. And I think in the Muslim world shame is not the most accurate word to use. I would probably say honour. That was sort of what was told to me by some of my Muslim friends, for it to be more accurate.

Certainly, socioeconomic things changed... There were different ways in which that expressed, and there was different pathways by which it got there. But at the root, and I think this is part of the human experience, there's unfortunately always going to be children that endure trauma, and on that trauma comes a toxic shame.

And there's a whole variety of ways in which it expresses itself. People who are overachievers often have a history, it's just a different… In order to compensate for feeling less than, they become superhuman to make them overcome that feeling. I chose an ideology; I went from feeling less than to an ideology that told me I was greater than.

If you really want to understand shame, read a book called Healing the Shame that Binds You by John Bradshaw. And that goes through intergenerational transfer of shame and collective shame, and there's a whole myriad of ways in which it manifests. Certainly, cultural differences can maybe affect the pathways to it manifesting, but it was the same in as much as if was different. I hope that helps you.

Kasari Govender: Yeah. Yeah, thank you. Sarah, did you have other follow up questions?

Sarah Khan: Yes, thank you. Thank you, Tony. I was wondering if you could tell us a bit about what programs exist in BC to deal with hate and extremism? So, programs that are specifically dealing with perpetrators of hate or folks who are more susceptible to hate and extremism.

And also, whether or not those programs are targeted mostly at young people or whether they also are aimed at older folks. I'm just thinking about online hate, and so that's the first question I have.

Tony McAleer: As far as non-governmental groups, I don't think there is. I know there is individuals. Are you guys talking to Brad Galloway?

Sarah Khan: Yes.

Tony McAleer: Yeah. So, he would be ideally suited to… He works with OPV in Alberta, as well as with Barbara Perry's organization in…

Sarah Khan: Centre for Bias and Extremism?

Tony McAleer: Yes. Yes. And I know he is doing, I'm not sure if counselling is the right word, but certainly coaching and mentoring. I don't have a counselling degree, so I don't ever call myself a counsellor, but I am a certified life coach and provide coaching and mentoring and help people get to a counsellor and get the healing work done. But as an individual people sometimes reach out to me, they reach out to Brad. Or they'll reach out to one of those other organizations and get referred back.

But I'm not sure of an organization based in BC. I think there's the S.A.F.E. BC, the provincial government has that organization which supports those efforts. But as far as a non-governmental group, I don't believe there is. I could be wrong.

Sarah Khan: Any other governmental organizations or other organizations that you're aware of? Any initiatives, I guess. Any other initiatives?

Tony McAleer: Police departments will have their hate and bias crime units, and we've had a good relationship in many jurisdictions. It takes a while to establish those relationships, but I know Brad has very strong relationships in that area where they can work to off ramp someone who's coming on their radar, and maybe hasn't committed a hate crime yet but is certainly headed that way. Providing resources to off ramp them.

Again, OPV in Alberta, most of their referrals come from law enforcement. So they've got often a good beat of what's happening, particularly when it's manifested extremism and there's a group. They often have a beat on them already because there's all kinds of chaos and criminality that surrounds those groups that they've become aware of. Maybe not an individual, but a group that's organizing, their intelligence is usually pretty good.

Sarah Khan: Thank you. Also, are you aware of any differences in how to approach folks based on their age or other demographic characteristics? Are there any differences? You've talked about shame and how it or concepts like shame or honor tend to transcend and relate to many folks who are perpetrating hate, but I was wondering if you had anything else to add to that in terms of other demographics such as age?

Tony McAleer: Again, their circumstances are going to be different, being in different phases of life. But it's like asking a psychologist if there's a difference between treating older people and younger people. I guess younger people, the family dynamic is certainly an issue.

And it becomes difficult for… Because half the people that reached out to us was family members of loved ones who wanted assistance. But often it's the family dynamic that's the source of the problem in the first place, so that's not as easy.

But we just meet people where they are. And I can't underscore the importance of listening. If there's one advice that we give parents over and over and over again, it's like, "Well, what do I say to my kid that's into this?" And I say, "Well, what do you want to do? Do you want to be right, or do you want to affect change? If you want to be right, tell them all the reasons why they're wrong. If you want to affect change, we listen to them."

And listening doesn't mean validating their beliefs, listening doesn't mean accepting their beliefs. It's a tension between never concede your values and never condemn… We have no problem condemning the activity, we have no problem condemning the beliefs, but we never condemn the individual.

And often these people, and you heard it with the truckers, they don't feel heard, the trucker convoy. And it's amazing, just in giving someone a safe space with which to… And it's hard to listen to. But when we give them that safe space to be heard without being personally judged, then the ego defenses start to come down. And there's a great quote by Brene Brown, who's done a ton of stuff around vulnerability and shame, and she says, "When we provide that safe space that they can express themselves, the defenses come down and transformation and healing can then start to happen."

And we just keep asking, why? And I often tell people, you want to have a conversation with someone, take your bestie and only have a conversation for an hour only asking questions. And when we curious to

what's going on underneath, then we can really sort of get at it. If we just end up going back and forth about whether or not immigration's a good thing, we're not going to get anywhere.

And often these people have, like I said, a real grievance. But it's where they go with it that's completely offside and harmful and dangerous. And so we can listen to the grievance, try and steer them somewhere else with the grievance without judging them for feeling whatever that is.

So, the three things that I always talk about are curiosity, courage, and compassion. I don't think we're going to tackle any of this from within our comfort zone. I think we're beyond that in this space, so it takes courage to move beyond our comfort zone and always be curious to where people are coming from. And when we can get to the meat of the issue by asking questions, then it's a possible way in.

And never losing sight of it's another human being, no matter what they've said or done. I believe nobody is irredeemable and there's a human being inside of there, and I've seen too many radical transformations from people you would expect to be so broken and so hateful that there was no way back. But I've seen miraculous things.

Kasari Govender: Tony, that's a very powerful place to leave us. I know we've taken you a bit over the time we promised to keep you. I had one follow up question, I don't know if you and Sarah may have some. I don't know if you're thinking you'll do written submissions, but we would love to hear from you if you're willing. And if you do that, I would be interested in hearing from you about whether you think times of crisis exacerbate the powerlessness and can lead to an increase in the kind of extremism and hate-

Tony McAleer: I would say shortly, yes. There's an old saying, "Under stress we regress." We go back to more basic human behaviors. Under stress we're no longer operating from the cerebral cortex. The cerebral cortex is off most of the time because it takes up so much energy, and it's turned on when it's needed.

But I think if you look at the behavior of people in the pandemic you can break it down into four categories, and it's the four responses of the amygdala, the reptile brain, and it's fight, flight, fawn, or flee. And people are operating from that basic level, and at that basic level there's nothing rational you can… You're trying to deal with them at the cerebral cortex view but they're thinking at the amygdala view.

Kasari Govender: Tony, thank you so much for being here with us. This really was incredibly useful, incredibly eye-opening for us. Again, I know you do this for a living, but I want to acknowledge that this is both a personal and a professional journey for you, and really grateful that you've taken the time to share both of those journeys with us today.

Tony McAleer: Just put some questions in an email and I can [crosstalk] for you, and if you ever need to talk again or whatever, I'm your humble servant.

Kasari Govender: Thank you so much, Tony. I'll pass it over to Camellia just to wrap us up.

Camellia Bhatti: Thank you. Yes, just echoing the Commissioner, Tony, thank you so much for your time and telling us about your story, but also your recommendations. So really just reminding that the deadline to submit those recommendations are March 31st, so we would really appreciate some of the items that

you've talked about or alluded to being submitted written by March 31st. You can also submit a video as well.

And I did just want to let you know that once the recording is ready, we will touch base with you before that is released to the public.

Tony McAleer: OK.

Camellia Bhatti: If you have any questions over the next month, you do have our email address. But just thank you again, Tony, we so appreciate your time.

Tony McAleer: Thank you.

Sarah Khan: Thank you.

Kasari Govender: Thank you. Take care.

Tony McAleer: Bye-bye.

Kasari Govender: Bye.

Sarah Khan