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Show of Force

Gun nuts on the move in Northside

By Gregory Flannery

A vigilante posse of 60 people -- all of them white, all but three of them men -- marched Sept. 28 through Northside.

Although billed as a protest against an Ohio law forbidding the carrying of concealed weapons, the marchers carried no signs, chanted no slogans and distributed no literature along the route. They were conspicuous only for handguns in their holsters or protruding from their waist bands.

When two or more black civil rights activists gather in public, a phalanx of Cincinnati Police officers is sure to follow. But when the armed white men assembled on Florida Avenue, no police officers were in sight.

Steve Sunderland of Northside, a professor at the University of Cincinnati, called police but was told the marchers have a legal right to carry guns so long as they're in plain sight.

"There is no sign of our police," Sunderland said. "The fact that these people are Caucasian doesn't mean they don't need to be carefully watched."

As the vigilantes gathered, the only visible police presence was a pair of Kentucky cops joining them.

"This is the kind of thing that gives police officers a bad name," Sunderland said.

Sunderland was one of a handful of protesters following the armed group as it passed St. Pius X Church, the Hand of God Ministries and Wesleyan Cemetery.

"This is Cincinnati at its worst," he said. "There are children in this neighborhood. To disrupt this neighborhood on a Sunday afternoon is terribly offensive. This is going to take weeks to recover from."

Sunderland's wife, Stephanie Sunderland, a member of Northside Community Council, was part of a group that met last week with march organizer Vernon Ferrier.

"We pleaded with him to take this event out of the community," she said. "People have been traumatized by gun incidents in Northside."

Just two miles away last week, a 7-year-old boy died after another child accidentally shot him while playing with a gun. The gun march's proximity to that tragedy wasn't lost on Arthur Phelps, a monitor with the Cincinnati Community Relations Commission who observed the march.

"That little boy was the cousin of my baby's mama," he said.

Phelps said he was glad the weather Sept. 28 was cool, as summer heat could have provoked violence, he said.

"A gun is a threat to people," he said. "It causes conflict. I don't want to live in the cowboy age. I don't feel some of these people are qualified to carry guns."

Nonviolence activist Aaron Rogers, heavily armed with large plastic water guns, followed the gun marcher. He was ready to squirt when necessary, he said.

"I'm armed to the teeth," Rogers said. "All my guns are too big to be concealed. I'm defending myself and my friends because at any minute those guys could go crazy."

One counter-protester stood on Hamilton Avenue as the posse walked by, enumerating the marchers.

"Potential murderer, potential murderer, potential murderer," he said.

Seeing a little girl holding the hand of a man packing a pistol, the counter-protester said, "Potential future murderer."

As the march went on, Cincinnati Police officers on bicycles and in squad cars began to follow. As the march wound down, two members of the Black Panther Nation arrived. Brother X, chairman of the local Panther chapter, began yelling, "Go get your guns, black men!" At least half a dozen police officers positioned themselves near the Panthers as they stood at Florida and Chase avenues.

Hamilton County Commissioner Phil Heimlich arrived after the march, warmly greeted by the posse. Heimlich said he wanted to show his support.

Hal McKinney was there, too. Arrested earlier this year for shooting an alleged robber in the head in a Northside bar, he got a free pass when a grand jury issued no indictment.

"I'm only being associated with the march because it needs responsible adults," McKinney said.

McKinney had announced plans to run for city council this fall but didn't submit sufficient signatures on a candidacy petitions to get on the ballot. He sneered at the Sunderlands and other anti-violence activists following the posse.

"I think they're part of the problem," McKinney said. "They want to have Northside perceived as a safe, growing community, and it's not. Quality of life issues have to come before flowers."

Perhaps the greatest irony was that the person most at risk of being arrested during the march was a peace activist who wasn't armed at all. Michael McCleese of Northside, arrested March 20 for protesting the U.S. invasion of Iraq, is wanted on a capias for

refusing to pay court costs following his conviction for obstructing official business. He followed the posse, criticizing its message.

"I'm here because this is my neighborhood," McCleese said. "I have concerns when 70 mostly white men packing heat, most of them not from this neighborhood, walk through my neighborhood, which is at least 50 percent African-American. I think it sends the wrong message: a message of violence, vigilantism. The message they send is, 'Cross me and I'll shoot you.' " ©

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