

# Former white nationalist Derek Black to speak at StraightTalk Series

[news.furman.edu/2019/09/03/straighttalk-series-concludes-talk-former-white-nationalist-derek-black](https://news.furman.edu/2019/09/03/straighttalk-series-concludes-talk-former-white-nationalist-derek-black)

September 3,  
2019



Derek Black was a white nationalist to the core and an active advocate for its ideology, his identity shaped from birth by living in a world where white people are the true victims of racism and discrimination, the Holocaust didn't happen, and races should be kept "pure" and live separately.

Black's father, Don Black, is a former Ku Klux Klan leader and founder of the Stormfront, one of the oldest and most influential white supremacist online forums. Don Black's predecessor at the head of the KKK, the infamous David Duke, is Derek Black's godfather.

Yet Derek still managed to turn away from the movement as a 22-year-old, announcing his decision [in a letter he wrote](#) to the Southern Poverty Law Center. Now 30 and pursuing a Ph.D. in history at the University of Chicago, Black will tell his story and offer insights into the current rise of nationalism in the United States and Europe in "Why I Left the White Nationalist Movement," the final installment of the three-part StraightTalk Series scheduled for Sept. 12 in Furman's McAlister Auditorium.

"I think the world is very complicated, but there are ways to understand things like this El Paso shooting ... and how it is not isolated, how it is completely true that there is some ideology behind it that's not so fringe," Black said. "And the only way to really understand this is to understand the longer-term history of white-supremacist ideology that has always been at the very center of our society, even though we don't always like to look at it, and understand that there is a way out. But we have to be quite deliberate and thoughtful about how to do that."

Deliberate and thoughtful is a good way to describe the process that ultimately led Black to renounce racism. Home-schooled as a child, his views were challenged for the first time when he enrolled in New College of Florida, a liberal arts school in Sarasota, where he met people of different races and faiths.

Black increasingly questioned his convictions thanks in part to more information and, especially, new relationships. Most significant were friendships with Jews, who, rather than reject him, invited him over for Shabbat dinner on a weekly basis.

"I really thought there was no challenge to my belief system that was even possible," Black said. "They didn't even bring it up ... We would talk about religious history and arts and what was happening around campus, and the idea was that inviting me there would be a statement in itself."

It took several years, but eventually Black couldn't reconcile what he'd learned with what he thought he knew.

"All the evidence that my family had used that I thought was good evidence, like IQ and crime, were not statistically real. They didn't hold up to scientific rigor," Black said. "Those conversations combined with the idea that this (worldview) is really hurting people, and people who I had come to know and had some connection to ... ultimately ended with me feeling like it was not an ideology that I could agree with."

In the years since, Black has been an outspoken critic of white nationalism, and one of the goals of his talk is to highlight how deeply ingrained the ideology is in society.

"It's not that I came out of a crazy fringe movement that has nothing to do with mainstream America," he said. "The things that white nationalists believe are things that are believed by millions of people in a much (subtler) and less extreme way."

White supremacists have tried to reach those people by avoiding words and slurs that are no longer socially acceptable. This is an intentional strategy Black himself helped to implement when he was a teenager.

“When you are advocating white nationalism it’s easier in my experience to get people to feel like they’re willing to agree as long as you’re sort of encapsulating it in things that seem mainstream, like talking about crime rather than talking explicitly about race, or talking about immigration being a job issue,” Black said. “Framing it that way, you can lead people sometimes to a point where they’re willing to be much more explicitly racist.”

Black says another objective of his talk is for people to be inspired by his about-face without losing sight of the part that community persuasion and individuals play in confronting racism.

“The fact that I went through this traumatic and dramatic transformation is a moment of hope. It means people who are really committed to this can be persuaded, and I’m happy to show that,” Black said. “On the other hand, I tend to surprise some people because I will show up and talk about the role of personal responsibility in this ... It doesn’t implicate people if you live in a society that acts this way, but it does if we choose to ignore it. Then we become responsible. There’s no real reason to be defensive about this. It’s something that’s beyond any of us as an individual ... But you do have to do something. Every individual has a role to play, and individual action is incredibly powerful. It’s not that one person doing something won’t change anything. I think it’s kind of the opposite: That’s the only thing that changes anything.”

The 2019 [StraightTalk Series](#), presented by [The Riley Institute](#) and the [Osher Lifelong Learning Institute](#), began on Aug. 29 and continues on Thursday, Sept. 5, with “Culture Wars: Multiculturalism and the Future of White Identity,” featuring talks by Eric Kaufmann, Ph.D., and Ashley Jardin, Ph.D.

Tickets remain for Black’s Sept. 12 talk, “Why I left the White Nationalist Movement,” and can be purchased [here](#). The Sept. 5 event is sold out.