

## Transcript for Christian Picciolini | Life After Hate (Episode 634)

Full show notes found here: <https://theartofcharm.com/634/>

CHRISTIAN: And when people become more resilient, more confident -- it's amazing quickly the ideology falls away because now there's nobody else to blame.

JORDAN: Welcome to The Art of Charm. I'm Jordan Harbinger and I'm here with producer Jason DeFillippo. On this episode we'll be talking with Christian Picciolini of Life After Hate. He's an Emmy award winning television producer, a prolific public speaker, and a reformed skinhead and white power extremist, author of [\*Romantic Violence: Memoirs of an American Skinhead\*](#). His work and life purpose are born of a purpose are born of a profound need to atone for a grisly past. We'll hear more about that here. This, Jason, was like the true version of American History X or something for me.

JASON: Absolutely and I know these guys from back in the day since -- this whole episode took place in Chicago. I used to see these guys at shows all the time so I'm sure I've seen Chris around at a show, which is insane.

JORDAN: Yeah, that kind of blew me away. On this episode we'll uncover how identity, community, and purpose drive extremism, not ideology. We'll also learn why skinhead groups, rightwing extremism and race identity is more popular with youth now more than ever before, and we'll explore what we can we do if you or someone you know has joined, is thinking about joining, or is under the influence of one of these groups. This is a heavy topic with a really interesting and well spoken guest -- Christian Picciolini. See you on the other side.

CHRISTIAN: We started this process 30 years ago when I was involved in the movement where we were skinheads and we knew that because of our shaved heads and tattoos and swastika flags, we were scaring away the average American racist that we could pretty easily recruit if we just learned to massage our message and our look. So we started to do that, we started to grow our

hair out and stop getting tattoos and encourage the people that we were recruiting to, you know, wear suits and not boots and go to college and get jobs in law enforcement and run for office. And here we are, 30 years later, after that process started and what do we see? We see kind of a massaged message with the same rhetoric behind it -- the same fear rhetoric, about "the other," and you know, they're wearing suits and they run for office and maybe even hold some of the highest offices in our country.

And while the massaged message is slightly different because it's more palatable to some people, it's the exact same thing. It's just an evolution of marketing is what happened. They've learned to become normal, they've learned to blend in -- and we used to call it leaderless resistance where we told people, "Don't join groups. Be a lone wolf," so to speak. You know, it's harder for law enforcement to take down an organization if there is no organization. It's easier for you to convince people about the ideology and appeal to their fears and ignorance if, you know, you speak their language. And, you know, come election day 2016 and a bucket of gasoline was kicked over you know, and ignited all those sparks that already existed all across America and perhaps even created a little bit more credence to what they've got going on.

JORDAN: You know who else says, "Be a lone wolf. Don't join an organization, etcetera," is ISIS. We had --

CHRISTIAN: Yeah.

JORDAN: -- Graham Wood who wrote *The Way of the Strangers*, a book about ISIS and recruiting, and he's, you know, visited those folks to explore their ideology and figure out what they're about. And they -- of course, I mean we hear that on the news. You know, "Attach in place," things like that.

CHRISTIAN: The parallels are striking between how a group like ISIS or Al-Qaeda recruits and how the far right recruits all over the world and even to some degree inner-city gangs. I mean, it's all

really about placing the blame on somebody else through fear rhetoric. Because people don't join these groups because of ideology. People join these groups because they're searching for an identity, a community, and a sense of purpose and there's some grievance, some underlying trauma or abuse or brokenness underneath all that -- could be mental illness, could be lack of employment or lack of an education, it could be trauma, it could be a whole sort of things.

And that's why they become vulnerable to the messages and the narratives of these extremist groups, because they are looking for somebody to blame for the problems that they have and they're not equipped to deal with them. So it's very easy for somebody to come across as savvy and say, "Oh, you know, it's the Jews," or, "It's the Muslims," or you know, whatever. Then your narrative changes and because you have now developed this identity, maybe you're not this awkward, bullied, marginalized person anymore, you're now this warrior and your community -- you know, you may not have fit in because you were socially awkward or you know, you didn't agree with people.

Now you have this built in community and they give you this sense of purpose. They say, you know, "Be proud of who you are," that's where it starts pretty benignly. Then it turns into, "Know your enemy." And then from "Know your enemy," it turns into, "Kill your enemy." that is the common theme no matter what type of extremist group you're talking about -- left, right, fundamentalist, religious, sovereign citizens, militia groups, you know -- you name it. That is the common theme that I think we need to understand.

JORDAN:

Take us through the early days when you were going through that same thought process, right? You're a kid and were you bullied or something? How do people start off going, "You know what? I should join," essentially like a race identity group, because that's a good idea. I mean, where does that -- how does that begin?

CHRISTIAN: Well let me set a basis for it first. So my parents were immigrants from Italy who came to the U.S. in 1966. And when they came here, you know, they were often the victims of prejudice. And they had to work very, very hard to make it in a country that was pretty foreign to them. But they were able to do that by assimilating and adopting some of the culture while not abandoning their own. But that kept them away from home seven days a week, fourteen hours a day. So while I had a lot of love -- my parents are great -- I was raised by other people most of the time. So I felt very abandoned as a young kid. So, I didn't come from a broken home, there wasn't addiction, there wasn't abuse -- which is often the case too with people who join extremist groups because there's another underlying pothole, so to speak. And mine was abandonment. I felt abandoned by my parents, I wanted to get the attention of my parents, and then I became very resentful of the fact that they themselves were immigrants, even though they were European immigrants.

At 14 years old I was standing in an alley, after having, you know, been marginalized and bullied for 14 years and not having a lot of friends. I was standing in an alley and smoking a joint and this guy comes roaring down the alley with a 1964 Firebird and it's kicking up gravel and dust and it stops six inches from me. And this guy gets out of the passenger side, and the year was 1987, I was 14 years old -- nobody knew what a skinhead was in this country yet. This was before Geraldo got his nose broke and Oprah had him on television.

JORDAN: Right.

CHRISTIAN: Guy walks over to me and he pulls the joint from my mouth and he looks me in the eye and he says, "Don't you know that that's what the communists and the Jews want you to do to keep you docile?" I was 14, man. I didn't know what a communist was except for, you know, Drago and my favorite Rocky movie. I didn't know if I'd met a Jewish person and I probably wouldn't have ever known that if they were standing right in front of me. I hardly knew what the word docile meant, to be quite honest. But, what happened at that moment was he was the first adult

-- because he was much older than me -- who told me not to do something harmful because of a real reason.

JORDAN: Right, yeah.

CHRISTIAN: My parents would have said, "Don't do that because it's stupid," or, "Don't do that because what are other people going to think if they see you doing that?" It was more vanity for them. But this guy -- even though I had no clue what he was talking about -- he was charismatic and he paid attention to me and then that conversation continued after he scolded me. He asked me my name and he recognized it was Italian and he started to say, "Well you know, Italians are great warriors and you should be very proud of, you know, your culture," and then that's how it started. And all of a sudden I was drawn into this community. He fed my identity and then eventually he gave me the purpose and I fully swallowed it because I wanted to belong to this group.

JORDAN: Yeah, well you don't have to feel too bad about that. That same exact sentiment worked on a huge number of people in Italy and Germany in the 1930s and '40s, so -- and they were adults who should have known better and did largely know better.

CHRISTIAN: I think it probably happened more recently than that in our own country.

JORDAN: Absolutely. Of course it did. And I remember talking with a kid when I was probably 14 or 15 and he was telling me, "I'm going go get my skinhead tattoos." Oh, we met on AOL chat because he messaged me with something like, "Hey you Jew," or something like that and I was like, "How do you even know?" I mean -- and he was probably just sending that to everybody in the chatroom, honestly, to see who would reply.

CHRISTIAN: You know that same guy is still sitting in that La-Z-Boy chair in his parent's basement saying that exact same thing to other people, right now, today.

JORDAN: Well you know what's funny -- instead of replying with anger, I was just like, "Hey, what's going on?" We just actually started talking and he's like, "Yo I'm going to be a skinhead, my brother's a skinhead, and we're going to beat people like you up," and I realized he's probably like 11, you know, or 14. I mean, who talks like that? Who cares? That's a little kid thing to say. And we actually got into a dialogue about this. I remember him telling me, "I'm getting my tattoos next week. I'm going to be in," -- the group was called the Northern Hammerskins, you may have heard this.

CHRISTIAN: Ah. Yeah I ran the Northern Hammerskins for a couple of years.

JORDAN: Okay, well he was going to go meet you guys and get some tats. Ha. This is in Michigan so I think that might have been your area or a part of the area where these guys were.

CHRISTIAN: That was definitely a state that I led.

JORDAN: Yeah.

CHRISTIAN: I was interim director for the Northern Hammerskins probably from 90 to 93 or 94, maybe.

JORDAN: Really? That's definitely during the timeframe that I had this conversation. That is crazy.

CHRISTIAN: I apologize for that 11 year old ignorant kid.

JORDAN: You know what though? It's okay because we kept talking for weeks after that because I was so curious about this guy. I was probably 13, 14 years old. I'd never encountered anything like this and I figured I was safe because I was online. He didn't really know who I was and I kept saying and asking questions. I guess that -- now that I look at it -- it was a little bit more maybe in my nature, what we're doing now. I just kept asking him why. And it was always just, "Well this is what the Jews are doing," and I'd -- "How do you know that?" "Well my brother said that." "How does he know that?" No real answer. And I said, "Go

ask him, I'm really curious. I want to know more," and he's like, "Do you want to come to a meeting?," and I was like, "No, one step at a time," you know? And I just kept asking him these questions and I think even after a while, he realized that it just didn't make any sense.

CHRISTIAN: Well you know what, Jordan, what you did was exactly what I do and what my organization does is -- you know, Life After Hate -- we try and help people disengage from hate groups and these hateful ideologies. Not by arguing with them and not by getting in their face or, you know, punching them or taking away their gym membership. You know, what we do is we approach with compassion because that's the way we were transformed. When we were at our worst, we received compassion from the people we least deserved it from, when we least deserved it. And that's how we were able to change our narrative and understand the other and connect and humanize other people because we'd been so detached from that and we were taught to blame them -- it was that compassion and that dialogue that really changed us. Yeah, so you know, you were way ahead of this. You should come work for us.

JORDAN: Yeah. I mean, it was something that I'm not sure I was really naturally that good at, at that point. I can tell you with, probably some certainty, that we didn't finish all of our conversations. And one of my regrets is he used to message me like, "Hey, what's going on," and I would be like, "Oh, I'm busy now. I can't talk to this person," or, "I'm bored of this," and I didn't quite get the gravity of the situation then he eventually stopped messaging me. And look, the fact of the matter is, if his older brother was the one recruiting him into this organization, I -- at some level felt -- no matter what I do, he's going to join anyway. Which, it sucks because that's not necessarily the case.

CHRISTIAN: It would be amazing if you could find this guy today.

JORDAN: Yeah, the problem is AOL chat -- not going to happen. Even if the screen name is still active, there's no record of that stuff. But, the reason I brought that up is not to say, "Gee, I discovered

skinheads before now," it's to say look, there's clearly -- there's an element to this. There's a certain type of person that is joining this not because they believe those things, that comes at the end if it ever comes at all, from my understanding.

CHRISTIAN: Yeah. You know there may be people who just have questions and, you know, are so isolated from people that it's easy to hear this fear rhetoric that other people are saying and politicians and media. And it's easy to swallow it and say, "Oh, okay." And then they come across somebody who's a recruiter and that person just reinforces it, and then they will start believing this ideology but I don't think that that's what drives them to these groups or to say these comments online. I really think that -- even online -- people are part of a community. The Alt-right folks have a community. You can create an identity online that is completely fantasized from your real life. So the reason that people are becoming quote unquote radicalized online is because they don't fit in in real life but they do fit in online.

JORDAN: I've noticed that a lot of the Alt-right figures -- and of course a favorite game of the Alt-right, and I'm going to ask you about this in a little bit -- is to pretend like they don't know what Alt-right means or they can't quite define it or they've never heard of that before or that's something that only the left says even though Richard Spencer owns the website. Or that they don't agree with that guy because that guy is a cuck, of course. Everybody who doesn't agree with you is a cuck in that case, as well.

CHRISTIAN: Right.

JORDAN: But, they create these worlds in which they are a superhero that's oppressed by everyone and all of their little minions are like, "Uh, it's only us now," and it just looks so obviously familiar to anybody who's studied any form of history, that that's what brownshirts have always done, except for now it's the brown shirt geek legion of like, "Well, you know, I've always been oppressed by the Man at school but now I'm a tough guy because I've got this gang of people on the Internet that will

post your wife's details online if we decide we're mad at you. Because now we can be anonymous and hide," whereas before that kind of thing would frankly have gotten your butt kicked, which is why -- one reason, I would assume why guys in your situation join actual gangs and hang out with each other.

CHRISTIAN: Yeah, I mean I have to say that 30 years ago had these same Alt-right folks been around our guys, we probably would have not liked them very much --

JORDAN: Yeah.

CHRISTIAN: -- I think we probably would have kicked their asses but you know, it is what it is. Things evolve. But it's the same thing, I mean whether we're calling it the Alt-right or white nationalism or neo-Nazism, it's just a level of denial on their part, publicly. Now, in private, they have no problem calling themselves, you know, national socialists or whatever they're calling themselves these days. Now I think they're called ethno-nationalists and identitarians and -- it's just constantly evolving so that they can stay one step ahead of the media understanding exactly what they are. But the fact is, they haven't changed.

JORDAN: Right, "Here's this arbitrary distinction about why we're not Nazis because those people were only in the '40s. Yeah, sure it's 98 percent overlap but we're different in this one way so it's completely different now and anybody who labels us as that is just being ignorant." Okay. I mean I understand their need to do that. I wouldn't want to be labeled a Nazi either, even if my ideology overlapped 99 percent or half -- depending on what sort of level we're talking about here. But, let's get back to your origin story here. So, you're smoking a joint, guy takes it out of your mouth after rolling up, Matthew McConaughey style, in a Thunderbird or something like that -- tells you, "Hey man that's what Jews want you to do so that you're docile," neither of you probably knew the meaning of that word but it didn't matter because he seemed cool and was listening to you. How does that go from throwing your joint on the ground in sort of a very

'80s movie fashion, to you then suddenly being the leader of one of the largest skinhead gangs anywhere in the United States?

CHRISTIAN: Well that guy that stopped me and crushed the joint was America's first neo-Nazi skinhead leader. And the neo-Nazi skinhead movement started in that alley about a year and a half prior to that event. His name was Clark Martell, you know, Chicago Area Skinheads was the group that brought it over from England and it grew from there and that's where the Hammerskins grew out of. For me it was, you know, riding my stupid little bike up and down that alley and, you know, running to the store to buy him cigarettes when, you know, a 14 year old kid could still and say that it was, you know, for your parents or something like that.

You know, I was kind of their gofer for a little while and then I shaved my head and then I, you know -- one of them gave me an old pair of combat boots that were sitting in a closet somewhere. And slowly but surely they brought me in and I learned the rhetoric. I learned everything from the playbook and I became very good at recruiting myself. I had found my confidence. And then one day, when I was 16 years old, Clark and most of the older original skinhead crew had gone out to attack another female skinhead that was part of their crew because earlier they had seen her standing at a bus stop with a black man. And when they went to her apartment, they kicked in her door and they beat her and pistol whipped her and left her for dead --

JORDAN: My God.

CHRISTIAN: -- but not before painting a swastika on her wall with her own blood.

JORDAN: Ugh. That is so freaking crazy and diabolical and that's disgusting.

CHRISTIAN: And it is disgusting. And I was so lucky to not be there and maybe it was because I was too young and they didn't really

trust me or whatever. But I was lucky to not be there but I was unlucky at the same time because what that did was left a void. I mean, all these older skinheads now were gone. They were either in prison or they ran or, you know, tried to disappear and here I was the guy -- even though I was only 16 and the youngest, I'd been around the longest. And here I was part of this very infamous skinhead crew that now it started to spread all over the country. You know, everybody who'd been recruited after me looked to me as the new leader and asked what we should do.

And I was very eager -- I was always very ambitious as a young kid and maybe that's because my parents were entrepreneurs or just because they had to work really hard when they came to this country. I always grew up thinking, "Well you have to run your own business. You don't work for anybody else." So I almost saw this -- at 16 years old -- as an entrepreneurial opportunity for me, where I stepped in and I was able to organize -- I recognized pretty quickly that music in that movement was a very powerful tool, both for propaganda and for recruitment, and I started one of America's first white power skinhead bands.

The music was very effective at getting young kids to come to shows, to become indoctrinated by the lyrics and the propaganda, and to incite them to be violent. You know, suddenly we had the coolest parties and there were hundreds of kids and people were shaving their heads and coming to meetings and it really started to work. We did our fair share of violence. You know, I don't want to not talk about that. We definitely hurt a lot of people but that wasn't our primary mission. Ours was more recruitment and marketing. But yeah, we did absolutely hurt a lot of people along the way and I feel very responsible for not only the people that I hurt physically but for the people that I brought into my organization that completely affected their trajectory in life. Some of them died, some of them went to prison, some of them got stuck in that movement and that's my fault.

JORDAN: Jason.

JASON: Yeah, this is Jason the producer. Question -- did you ever hang out at many Naked Raygun shows at Metro?

CHRISTIAN: Oh, man I think I've seen more Naked Raygun shows -- not only at Metro but even in VFW halls back in the --

JASON: Yeah.

CHRISTIAN: -- early '80s to -- more than any other band I've ever seen in my life.

JASON: Yeah, I bet we have been to many shows together.

CHRISTIAN: It's likely.

JASON: Yeah, for sure. And, yeah, you guys were dicks.

CHRISTIAN: Yeah we were. We were.

JORDAN: Jeez Jason, you are like the Forrest Gump of underground music slash tech scenes. For real. You pop up everywhere.

JASON: Yeah.

CHRISTIAN: Metro was a primary recruitment ground after punk rock shows.

JASON: Oh, yeah, definitely.

CHRISTIAN: Stand out front and, you know, look for the kids that, you know, look like scumbags and promise them paradise.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

JORDAN: You mentioned that you hurt people. Are you targeting minorities or are you actually just going after other white kids thinking, "Well if we make them an enemy then they'll want to

actually join for protection?" I mean what kind of targeting are we talking about?

CHRISTIAN: We definitely targeted minorities but interestingly enough, we fought mostly against other white kids. You know, anti-racist skinheads. They called themselves SHARP -- Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice -- and they moved into our town; we fought them a lot -- you know, being from Chicago as well, we also fought with a lot of street gangs.

JORDAN: All right so young people are pissed off in general, right? Nowadays they distrust their parents, media, business, cops, government -- they are not looking forward to a bright future so, you're really not sure what's going to happen in your future, right?

CHRISTIAN: Yeah.

JORDAN: And like I mentioned before, there is that parallel with ISIS. The gang parallel is right there. People are quite disconnected and it's not the ideology though that's driving this, it really is that loss of purpose or loss of community, loss of a sense of identity -- but it's not racial identity, right? I'm just trying to sort of clarify that minutia.

CHRISTIAN: You know, I think hatred is born of ignorance. Fear is its father and isolation is its mother. So if you take fear, fear of the unknown -- people you're blaming for some problem in your life -- and you're so isolated from them that you've never met them or had a meaningful interaction with them or a meaningful dialogue and you're just basing it on all of this information that's coming from who knows where, fake news, conspiracy theories, your friends, your family, whoever -- the president. It turns into hate that distills into violence.

So when we're talking about ICP -- the identity, the community, and the purpose -- if there's an underlying grievance, if there is an underlying trauma or abuse, we call them potholes -- the things that deviated them from their original path. And it could

be an experience, it could be a bad experience where, you know, you got robbed by a black guy. And because you've never had a connection to other African Americans -- because, you know, you might be isolated in some rural part of America -- and then all you see on television are all these gang flicks and you know, Law and Order arresting, you know, the black guys, you become afraid of that and that becomes your narrative.

So, you know, for me, it really was that trauma of feeling abandoned that sucked me in and made me seek attention, made me project my attention -- and the fact is is I hated other people because I hated myself. I hated my own situation and I was in pain over that and I wanted to project that onto other people so I didn't have to deal with it. And I suspect that that's the case with 99 percent of the people who become radicalized into violent extremism, regardless of what type of extremism.

So let's talk about, you know, what just happened in Alexandria, Virginia.

JORDAN: Yeah.

CHRISTIAN: Here's a guy who is on the left, right? Something we also don't talk. We hardly talk about the far right and we hardly talk about the far left. All we talk about is, you know, quote unquote radical Islamic extremism, which I can't stand the name of because it's totally wrong. But, this guy was fed conspiracy theory stuff and he was, you know, very fervent. All the details aren't in but clearly the guy has been living in his van since March. That was the last time his wife saw him. Clearly there was this underlying pothole that existed and it boiled up to a point where he felt so desperate that he couldn't solve his own issues that he wanted to just try and solve it by projecting that onto other people. And that leave a legacy and makes you a martyr to some people. It feels like you've done something to do your part without leaving the world as this useless person that you feel like.

JORDAN: Just to put a pin on this, tell us exactly what you're talking about right now.

CHRISTIAN: There was a shooting by a, you know, middle aged white male in Alexandria, Virginia at a baseball practice where the republicans were practicing for a yearly game that they have against the democrats. It's a fundraiser and this man who was living in a van in that area took out a rifle and a pistol and he started shooting at the people who were practicing on the field, wounding, you know, a representative from the government and several other people, and was eventually -- because of Capitol Police luckily being there, was eventually taken down.

But listen, anybody who does that is suffering from something. And I'm not saying, you know, it's mental illness, because I don't always want to give it that excuse. It could be something else. It could be the fact that, you know -- and I'm speaking in generalities here -- he's always had a hard time finding a job or maybe he went to prison for something when he was younger and that's ruined his opportunity in the future, and maybe there is mental illness that's gone undiagnosed or untreated, or maybe there's abuse and trauma that's never been dealt with or talked about in a proper way.

And all those things boil up to a point where it makes people feel pretty worthless. If they don't get the services or the opportunities that they need and if they're always constantly being feed these counternarratives, these alternate realities from fake news and conspiracy theories -- well, you know, I mean there are people who really, really believe that stuff. There are people who really believe that during Pizzagate, there were children and child pornography being filmed in a basement of a pizza place in Washington D.C., and in fact somebody went there, with a gun, to check it out.

I mean, we have to be very careful, there's so much information out there online that it's hard to distinguish what's real news, what's fake news, what's parody, what's propaganda, and we really do need to become more critical thinkers. But I think

more than that, we need to make sure that the people who need services and opportunity are getting that early so it doesn't culminate into some tragedy like we see almost day after day.

JORDAN: This type of thing continues to happen and it's sort of a big question mark whether or not it's just the focus of mentally ill people because it's in the news and because it's something they're reading about online often, or whether or not this is actually inciting the violence itself. And that's sort of a different question for probably a different set of experts here. You were quite enterprising when it came to running this skinhead gang. I mean, you weren't just going to punk shows and kicking people's butts, you got invited to meet with Gaddafi.

CHRISTIAN: Yeah, in the early '90s he sent an attache to meet. Originally it was supposed to meet with Clark Martell but because he was in prison and I was now running the organization, you know a skinhead from Toronto who'd been tasked with meeting, you know, with us, invited us to go to Libya and Gaddafi wanted to fund organizations that were opposing Jews in America because, let's face it, their enemy is also the Jew. And here's a prediction that I will make that's a chilling prediction: It's just a matter of time before we see the far right extremists and ISIS inspired extremists working together. And most people are going to think that that's crazy because, you know, they hate each other. But, if you think about it, who they hate more is the common enemy and they both consider the Jew the common enemy.

JORDAN: How does Gaddafi get ahold -- is he sending you guys an email? I mean how does somebody like that even get ahold of somebody like you. This is so confusing.

CHRISTIAN: Yeah there was no email back then. Or at least not that I was connected to. But, they contacted somebody in Canada and it was the Northern Hammerskins in Canada, in Montreal, and they'd sent somebody there. And that guy came to me when I was the interim director and asked if I would go and I said, "No." As much as I, you know, was willing to accept money, I was still

very patriotic. I was not interested in working with a dictator. At that time especially, a non white dictator. Luckily I refused because what ended up happening was that it was a sting operation set up by Canadian intelligence. They were aware of -- that meetings were happening so they actually imbedded somebody in and -- after, you know, I was asked to go and everybody who decided they were going to go got brought down.

JORDAN: I'm just imagining logging into your AOL and it's like, "You've got mail. Hi, this is Gaddafi. You want to come to Libya and check out my palace? By the way, I want to kill a bunch of Jews in Chicago, indiscriminately." It's just mind blowing to me. It almost seems like a prank. It almost seems like had you done it, somebody would have met you at the airport and been like, "You guys are idiots. Let's go have a beer." It just sounds unbelievable.

CHRISTIAN: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, looking back now it does sound pretty bizarre. Yeah, I was lucky I didn't -- it could have been something that destroyed my life and other people's lives.

JORDAN: How did you start to transform your thinking? Because right now, I mean, at this point in the story, you've got to be one of the most convinced, convicted skinheads anywhere. You're leading the charge. People are looking to you for ideological support.

CHRISTIAN: You know the truth now is that I was seeking power and I definitely questioned my ideology the whole eight years that I was involved. I stayed in from 87 to 95. I questioned it every step of the way but the power drew me back in and I always found some reason to kind of put aside, you know, that confusion that I was having. My celebrity was growing, I was becoming kind of an international leader, and because of the band, kind of a subject.

And, what started to change me is pretty simple, actually. In 1992, I met a girl and we fell in love and she wasn't a part of the movement. And we ended up getting married when I was 19

years old and we had our first child at 19 and our second one at 21. And I can tell you that holding my son in my arms for the first time really challenged my idea of who I was. I suddenly reconnected with the innocence that I lost at 14 years old. And that identity, community, and purpose that I had been entrenched in with this movement -- my new identity as a father and my community, you know, with my wife and my child and my purpose of being this family man, really challenged my narrative -- started to, anyway.

I decided at that point, at my wife's encouragement -- because of course she didn't agree or like anything that I was involved in -- I pulled back. So I stopped going out on the streets, I stopped performing with the band, and I decided I was going to open a record shop. My compromise with her was I was going to run a business to support the family but I wanted to sell white power music, because that's really all I knew at that time. And I opened a small record shop on the Southside of Chicago and I sold white power music and I also sold punk rock and heavy metal and hip hop. But 75 percent of my music sales were white power music. This was before the Internet so people were, you know, coming in from every state to buy it.

What I didn't expect was the customers who were coming in to buy the punk rock and the metal and the hip hop having such an effect on me. At first I was very standoffish with minorities who would come in or anybody who, you know, I considered opposite of my views. And this was a small neighborhood so everybody knew what I was about. Over time, I started to have really meaningful dialogues with these people. They showed me compassion. They could have punched me, they could have broken my windows, they could have spray painted my store, slashed my tires -- they never did that. And even though they knew who I was and how terrible, you know, my ideas were, they came in and every time they came in, they approached me with compassion and with empathy. And it was that compassion and empathy from the people that I least deserved it from, when I least deserved it, that really helped me finally question what it was that I was involved in, and allowed me the

strength to realize that that wasn't what I wanted to do, and it helped me get out.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

JORDAN: So when you were enjoying all this celebrity and you were seeking power and then you left, what now fills that gap for you? Or is that gap gone somehow?

CHRISTIAN: That's an interesting question. Actually, when I decided to pull the white power music from the shelves because I didn't agree with it anymore and I was embarrassed to sell it in front of these new friends, because it was 75 percent of my revenue, the store collapsed. I had to close it. So I lost my job, at the same time I lost my wife and children because they left me because I hadn't left the movement quickly enough. I hadn't paid enough attention to them. I didn't have a great relationship with my parents even though they tried very, very hard for those eight years to try and help me. And suddenly, I lost my community. I lost this celebrity, this status, this power, and I lost my identity. And for five years after I left, even though I had started to treat other people with respect and dignity and I treated everybody fairly and just, I was miserable. And I was miserable because I was trying to outrun who I was. I decided I was going to wear longsleeved shirts to cover the tattoos, I was going to move, I was going to try and make new friends -- and even though I did that, because I wasn't revealing my past because I was trying to hide it, it was really killing me inside. And then, I woke up every morning where I contemplated taking my own life.

And until one day in 1999, one of the few friends that I had suggested that I had to change something because she didn't want to see me die. And I was like, "Okay." And she recommended to go apply for a job at IBM, where she worked, and I said, "You're crazy. What am I going to be doing at IBM? I don't have a degree. I don't know anything about computers. I don't own a computer. I got kicked out of six high schools -- one of them twice. And, you know, I'm a former neo-Nazi. Why would they even hire me?" And she was like, you know trying to

get me more confident. She was like, "Well just tell them you're really good with people."

I went in there and I submitted a resume that I'm sure I lied on.

JORDAN: "I'm a people person." Really? You're a skinhead, dude. I'm not sure if I buy that comment.

CHRISTIAN: Well, you know, I was very good at recruiting people so I did have a way of communicating but -- yeah, so you know, I got the job. And I don't know if it's fate, destiny, karma, whatever, God's will -- whatever, you know, your listeners want to call it -- when I got the job, the first day that they placed me on a project, where did they place me but at my old high school, the same one I got kicked out of twice to install like, all their computers and set up their network. Of course, I'm terrified.

Here I am, you know, now this adult and I'm sweating and I don't know what to say or what to do and I'm like sitting in my car like in fear that the minute I walk into this place, somebody's going to recognize me and, you know, tell me to get the F out. And I'd lose my job and this important thing that happened to me. And of course, what happened is I walk in and the old black security guard that I'd gotten in a fist fight with -- that got me kicked out the second time -- walks right past me. And, he didn't recognize me at that moment but I was frozen with fear until I decided that I had to do something because I couldn't live like that. And I followed him to the parking lot as he was getting into his car and I tapped him on the shoulder and when he turned around he recognized me and he was afraid.

JORDAN: Yeah. Of course. You followed him through the parking lot and you snuck up behind him, what were you thinking?

CHRISTIAN: Probably not the best idea at the time but, you know, it worked out because all I could think to say to this guy who I'd hurt in the past was, "I'm sorry." And he stuck out his hand and I shook it. We hugged and, you know, we cried. And he made me

promise that I would tell my story, that I would not hide it anymore because he recognized that my story wasn't just about some kid who became a neo-Nazi skinhead. It was about some kid who felt vulnerable and marginalized, who was convinced by somebody else's narrative for a selfish reason. And he recognized that that also happened to kids that join gangs and maybe he had premonitions about other terrorist groups. But he knew that my story was important for those reasons and that's when I started to tell people.

Slowly but surely I would tell people about my past. I want to have an opportunity to do so and I was like floored by the fact that they couldn't believe that I was the person that I was describing -- you know, the same person that they knew. And that really gave me hope and I noticed my life got better. I was a better dad, I was a better son, I became a better employee, and you know, I didn't want to kill myself every morning. And that's when I wrote my book. It took me 10 years to write my book and finish it but that was the true catharsis for me because I had to go back then and think about everything that I'd done and relive that -- not only my own pain but the pain that I caused other people -- and I was able to finally publish that recently.

JORDAN:

Of course the book [\*Romantic Violence: Memoirs of an American Skinhead\*](#) -- really interesting read. Interesting introspection that you've got -- really deep introspection that's quite admirable from someone coming from your position. I'm frankly a little surprised that your professional career -- the jobs that you got after that -- that this didn't catch up to you in some stronger way. Because I feel like a lot of people who are in this situation might be thinking, "I can't get out. It's impossible." I mean I'm just imagining you in a job interview for this handyman sort of repair business and things like that and your resume says something like, "Previous accomplishments: Doubled the size of my previous organization," and it's like, "Oh, what was your previous organization?" -- "Uh, well Mr. Rubenstein, you might want to have a seat, you know, while I explain this to you," and nothing like that ever happened.

CHRISTIAN: Yeah, well I -- you know, I think I was lucky that the Internet wasn't around. You know, that certainly helped. At an early age I was an entrepreneur too. So while I did work for other people, most of the time I ran my own businesses. I started a record label and an artist management company and then eventually I went on to produce a TV show. I was always honest after that. When I started to be honest about it, I told people and I actually -- I had learned one, how to forgive myself but I'd learned myself during that time and why I did the things I did. You know, I think as long as I was honest about that and genuine, people were willing to look past it. You know, it certainly wasn't the way I introduced myself when I met somebody. "Hi," you know, "my name is Christian," and shake his hand and all of a sudden I'm saying I'm the Nazi guy. So it came up when it was appropriate but you know, I was able to be genuine and honest about my story and I think that went a long way with people.

JORDAN: What about your gang? Were you seeing those guys around town and they're like, "You're next, buddy?" What happened?

CHRISTIAN: You know, I was a pretty selfish leader because of my ego at the time. And, I never really trained anybody to take over in my place when I left. So the group -- locally at least -- imploded. You know, while I did get some threats -- you know, I was raising a family and working full time so I wasn't really in the same circles as those people anymore. However, regionally and nationally and internationally, there were a lot of people that were very angry that I'd left and I was branded a race traitor. And, you know, certainly couldn't go to some places around the country where I knew there were pockets of people that would recognize me.

But I get more threats today than I did back then. And, you know, maybe chalk that one up to the Internet too. But, yeah, I mean I get threats and death threats on a daily basis.

JORDAN: Well now you must get more. Now you're even more visible.

CHRISTIAN: Yeah, I get more now just because of the nature of the organization and the work that I do and all the media attention that our organization is getting.

JORDAN: And of course the organization that you're referring to -- we'd love to hear a little bit about that as well.

CHRISTIAN: Sure. Life After Hate is an organization that I co-founded in 2011 as a nonprofit and our goal is to help people disengage from the far right -- from extremist groups. And everybody that works at Life After Hate is a former extremist. Most of us have been out for 20 years and have spent those 20 years speaking about our pasts. That makes us uniquely qualified to be these bridge builders to people who are in these movements because we understand their language, we understand why they say the certain things that they do and we also understand that they're based on fiction and not fact.

However, we don't really argue ideologically with folks. We listen more than we speak and we listen for those potholes that deviated their path. And that's how we help rebuild them, because we don't battle ideologically, we focus on the person. We try to make them more resilient, more confident and that could be through job training, an education, tattoo removal, mental health therapy, life coaching -- whatever the case may be. We focus on that. And when people become more resilient, more confident, it's amazing how quickly the ideology falls away because now there's nobody else to blame. They're more competitive, they're more confident, they have access to real information -- but that's not really possible until we immerse them in a situation or with people that they think that they hate.

So, I may introduce a Holocaust denier to a Holocaust survivor or an Islamophobe to an imam or a Muslim family and it's those associations -- oftentimes the first time they've ever met somebody that they claim to hate, it's those meaningful interactions that allow them to humanize these people and not fear them. Without arguing ideologically with anybody, because

we know that that polarizes us further -- that combination of resilience and introduction and connection is pretty amazing to counter that ideological thinking. And then after the fact, we have a very large support group of over a hundred people -- a private line group of all formers -- people who've gotten out on their own, people we've helped get out, and we have some pretty amazing conversations on their and it's like a support network.

JORDAN: What can people do if they know someone that is thinking of joining one of these groups, they suspect their kid or their cousin or their friend is being influenced by these people -- what's the first step? Because of course I'd love to say, "Hey give them the book but let's be real." If someone is going to parties and listening to punk music or having a blast with their friends, they're not going to go, "Maybe I should really sit down and read a long book about this and why it's bad." They're more inclined to watch something on YouTube if they're even open to the idea -- ideas of the contrary at all, for that matter.

CHRISTIAN: Sure. Well, you know, first I would say send them to [exitusa.org](http://exitusa.org) and that's our intervention portal, so to speak. But, you know, second I would say, don't argue with them. Listen to them, find out what it is exactly that they're angry about -- not what they're saying and who they're angry at but what they're angry about -- and treat them with empathy. Because I can tell you, if somebody would have punched me or argued with me, I would have punched back harder and argued stronger. But listen and understand and just show compassion and love will push out the hate. And I know that sounds Pollyanna but man, trust me, it works.

JORDAN: A little bit but I understand because obviously there's some sort of disconnect between those people and them viewing these other groups as actually human. Because it's very hard to hate people that are humanized.

CHRISTIAN: Right.

JORDAN: And there's also a disconnect between -- probably these people really seeing the true consequences of what they're doing. They're more thinking, "Hey it's cool. We all get together, we drink beer, and we talk about how bad Jews are. But, you know, this party this weekend is going to be amazing." They're not thinking, "Oh, no, really we need to solve this Jewish problem or this African American problem or this illegal immigrant problem," it's more of just like, a rallying cry from their meetings to Twitter. How many of these people are true believers and how many of them are just like, "Yeah, you know, I don't have any friends. These are my friends."

CHRISTIAN: I would say that there's a small percentage that are true believers and, you know, a large percentage that are kind of useful idiots to use an intelligence word. They're being duped and they're being used and even though they may believe the things that these people are saying, they don't understand the consequences. They've never had the connection to these people so they don't understand the truth.

They don't grasp the concept that there are over a billion Muslims in the world and a fraction of a fraction of a fraction of one percent of them are ISIS terrorists and the rest are just like them who go to, you know, worship and have families and work every day and you know, have the same struggles and fundamental human needs that they have. So, you know, I would say that there's hope. You know, there's always the sociopathic or psychopathic, you know, leader who, you know, would be very hard to reach but you know, most people aren't that person. Most people are, you know, in the community because it's comforting. The identity is something that feeds their ego or maybe makes them feel powerful and the purpose fills a void for them. Although it's a void that's being filled by a purpose that's not based on true fact or actual knowledge, it's based on theory and often conspiracy theory.

JORDAN: Christian I want to wrap with a story that I know is deeply personal for you. I asked you before whether or not the skinhead gangs had come back to punish you in some way and

I know we discussed that a little bit but tell us about your brother.

CHRISTIAN: So, my brother is 10 years younger than me and we were super close when I was young. He was the only friend I had, really. From the time I was 10 years old until, you know, I was 14 and I joined this group. And I -- you know, I really wasn't there for him during his own adolescence and development, you know? He had to live down my legacy as this now charismatic kind of powerful leader that everybody, you know, either feared or adored. We weren't the same personality type. He was very, kind of lovable and then funny and not a leader, you know? Very much a follower -- and he tried to follow in my footsteps. Not necessarily with the same ideology and I think part of that was because he was so angry at me for abandoning him, essentially like my parents abandoned me.

He kind of went down a different path and he started to hang around with some gang members. And one day he was driving around with one of his friends trying to buy some weed in a neighborhood that he shouldn't have been in because a month before, some Latino members had done a drive by shooting against some African American gang members in that neighborhood. And here's my brother driving around, you know, with olive skin -- being Italian -- and his friend was Latino -- driving. And they were looking for weed and he was shot and killed and I felt very responsible for that because I wasn't there for him because I felt like I abandoned him. And at his funeral, you know, friends and even some family were expecting me to flip out and this was after I, you know, had left the movement -- several years later.

And, I could tell you the last thing that I wanted was revenge. I missed my brother. I wanted him to be there and I was so blaming of myself for almost feeling responsible for how it ended up for him because he wanted to follow in my footsteps and get the same quote unquote respect that I got -- that, you know, I felt like it was my karma for having gone through what I did and hurt other people. Yeah, I mean I think that that

individual who shot my brother is probably a victim of the same type of trauma and abuse and lack of opportunity that so many other people are.

And, you know, I forgive him for what he did because it's probably a product of his environment, unfortunately. And I have to have compassion for people like that if I'm going to be genuine about the work that I do because I deal with people every day who have done really terrible things in their past. And when I try and work with them to help them humanize other people, you know, I remember my own experiences and that's what drives me. I use, you know, my own life experiences and how I was transformed and feelings that I had to really understand and connect with the people that I'm working with.

JORDAN: It sounds like you had by that point become more resilient -- by the time of your brother's death -- and you didn't need the crutch of hatred at that point.

CHRISTIAN: That's exactly right. That's exactly right. So at that point my kids were older and I had a great relationship with them. I had a great relationship with my parents that I rebuilt, I was remarried and had a -- you know, I still have an amazing wife that I've been married to for 15 years. You know, life was pretty good, you know? I'd been working at IBM and I'd become successful. Things were pretty great except, you know, I didn't have a relationship with my brother because when I tried to approach him as I started to recognize he was having problems, he pushed me away because he'd blamed me for not being there for him and I'll never forget that.

JORDAN: Christian, thank you so much for being so open with us today and showing us not only how to handle these situations -- these very difficult situations -- with those around us and maybe with our own loved ones. But, just your story of compassion and coming through this from the top and all the way out is incredible.

CHRISTIAN: I appreciate it Jordan, thank you so much for having me.

JORDAN: Great big thank you to Christian Picciolini. The book title is [\*Romantic Violence: Memoirs of an American Skinhead\*](#). Of course we'll link that up in the show notes for this episode as well. Crazy episode, Jason. Man this guy just went through the ringer. Terrible.

JASON: Yeah but he came out on the other side so much more improved, it's insane. It's a great story.

JORDAN: Yeah, absolutely. I just feel so bad that at the end his brother paid the price. It really is like American History X. I mean even that story just hammered that home even harder.

JASON: Definitely.

JORDAN: If you enjoyed this one don't forget to thank Christian on Twitter. We'll have that linked in the show notes as well. And tweet at us your number one takeaway from Christian Picciolini here. I'm @theartofcharm on Twitter. Remember, you can tap the album art, AKA your phone screen, in most podcast players. To see the show notes for this episode, we'll link to those show notes right on your phone. I also want to encourage you to join us in the AoC challenge at [theartofcharm.com/challenge](http://theartofcharm.com/challenge) or text AOC, that's 'A-O-C,' to 38470.

The challenge is about improving your networking and your connection skills and inspiring those around you to develop a personal and professional relationship with you. It's free -- a lot of people may not know that. That's the idea. It's unisex and it's a fun way to get the ball rolling and get some forward momentum in these skills.

We'll also send you our fundamentals Toolbox that I mentioned earlier on the show, which includes some great practical stuff, ready to apply, right out of the box, on reading body language, having charismatic nonverbal communication, the science of attraction, negotiation techniques, networking and influence strategies, persuasion tactics and everything else we teach here

at The Art of Charm. This will make you a better networker, a better connector, and a better thinker. That's [theartofcharm.com/challenge](http://theartofcharm.com/challenge) or text A-O-C to 38470. For full show notes for this and all previous episodes of the show, head on over to [theartofcharm.com/podcast](http://theartofcharm.com/podcast).

This episode of AoC was produced by Jason DeFillippo. Jason Sanderson is our audio engineer and editor, show notes on the website are by Robert Fogarty -- theme music by Little People, transcription by [TranscriptionOutsourcing.net](http://TranscriptionOutsourcing.net) -- I'm your host Jordan Harbinger. Go ahead, tell your friends because the greatest compliment you can give us is a referral to someone else, either in person or shared on the Web. Word of mouth is everything. So share the show with your friends and share the show with your enemies. Stay charming and leave everything and everyone better than you found them.



