

## ***Broome County Contends With the Roots of a Racist Massacre***

*After a man from Conklin, N.Y., was charged with a mass killing at a Buffalo grocery store, the community where he grew up has been forced to wrestle with hard questions.*



*Shops line a road in Conklin, N.Y., where the man who attacked a Buffalo grocery store grew up.*

**By Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura and Chelsia Rose Marcus**

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CONKLIN, N.Y. — Not long after the police identified a suspect in the racist massacre at a Buffalo grocery store, the phones in some local government offices here started ringing. On the other end were people making threats, enraged because they assumed that the suspect's hometown near the Pennsylvania border, some 200 miles from the scene of the shooting, had stoked his racism.

The reality, according to some elected officials and former classmates of the suspect in Broome County, an area of rolling hills in the northern reaches of Appalachia, is different. The community has had its share of racial tensions in recent years as it has grown more diverse, not unlike other places across the United States.

But in interviews last week, the officials and classmates said they could not see how those issues had played a part in causing the man, a recent graduate of Susquehanna Valley High School, to target Black people in a shooting on May 14 at Tops Friendly Market in Buffalo, killing 10 and wounding three more.

The gunman himself seemed to confirm as much, writing in a 180-page screed that he posted online that he had come to his racist views on the internet — not in Conklin, the suburb of Binghamton in New York's Southern Tier where he was raised.

But that has not stopped people here and across Broome County from wrestling with a difficult question: How could such hate have percolated in one of their neighbors?

“We teach our children that, as Americans, we need to stick together,” said William Dumian Jr., Conklin's town supervisor, “no matter what race, ethnicity or religion people are.”

As it searches its collective memory for warning signs or missed opportunities, the community is taking stock of a place that has long been marked by contradictions.

While the racist ideology that appears to have fueled the suspect, Payton Gendron, has spread on the far right in recent years, Broome County has slightly more Democrats on its voting rolls than Republicans. Arguments over charged issues like critical race theory have not played out in the chambers of local government with the same ferocity here as in other parts of the country. It is an area that does not fit neatly into cultural or political stereotypes.

And although Mr. Gendron considered himself to be an outcast in his community, he seemed to embody some contradictions of his own, according to his posts on the chat application Discord and interviews with his friends and classmates.

He was an 18-year-old who plotted a mass murder while feeling guilty about skipping college classes — and living in fear of getting in trouble with his parents.

Online, he raged against Black, Hispanic and Jewish people — and then logged off to hang out with his closest friend, Matthew Casado, who is Hispanic and whose girlfriend is Black. Seven weeks before the Buffalo attack, Mr. Gendron celebrated Mr. Casado's 19th birthday at a Mexican restaurant with Mr. Casado's family.

Mr. Casado and his girlfriend, Skylar McClain, both said in interviews that Mr. Gendron never let on that he felt such hate.

“He was never racist towards me or around me,” said Mr. Casado, adding: “I was one of the only friends, if not the only friend, he had.”

As Mr. Gendron sat this week in a Buffalo jail, some in Broome County blamed the internet entirely for his radicalization.

“This is a blue-collar, very hardworking group of people, down-to-earth people,” the Binghamton mayor, Jared M. Kraham, a Republican, said in an interview. “It seems that the many hours he spent online diving in and living in a hateful world is what made the difference here.”

Image



*A sign outside the Reliable Market grocery store in Conklin, where the suspect said he once worked.*

Still, others said the community was due for deeper self-reflection.

Gerald Smith, who was the Broome County historian until retiring in 2019, said many in the area “are not accustomed to seeing people of color or of different religions or ethnicities or cultures.”

“That fear over the years morphs into just disdain: ‘You are not like me. Therefore you must be an enemy,’” said Mr. Smith, who is white. “Then it becomes a racism that is so casual it doesn’t register anymore.”

It is a sentiment with roots in the 1920s, he said, when the Ku Klux Klan briefly relocated its state headquarters from New York City to Binghamton. About 100 years later, after the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer, racial tensions ran high again in Binghamton, as in much of the rest of the country.

Hundreds turned out to protest in June 2020, said Shanel Boyce, who helped organize the event. As the protesters gathered, Ms. Boyce recalled, others showed up dressed in tactical gear and carrying guns, standing nearby to watch.

“They shouted and spat at us, saying: ‘Go back to where you’re from,’” said Ms. Boyce, who is Black. “The racism here is commonplace.”

Around that time, the then-mayor of Binghamton, Richard David, was criticized by some Black residents who said he was dragging his feet in granting permits for artists to paint racial justice murals in the city. Mr. David, a Republican, left office in 2021 after serving the maximum number of terms.

And in nearby Endicott, just west of Binghamton, the Democratic deputy mayor, Cheryl Chapman, also came under fire that summer after posting a message on Facebook that read, in part: “White lives matter!!!”

“A notion that I heard a lot when I was canvassing running for office, is that all of ‘these people’ come up from New York City to Binghamton,” said Aviva Friedman, a Democratic Binghamton council member who often clashed with the former mayor. “You know, coded term for, ‘Oh, these poor people of color, Black people.’ They’re not talking about SUNY students.”

Periodically, there have been incidents in the area and surrounding regions that have hinted at ugly racial attitudes among some young people in particular.

In 2018, swastikas were found spray-painted on walls at Binghamton High School. Last winter, a Black teacher at Windsor High School, a short drive from Conklin, complained after students in the mostly white community dressed in racist costumes for a “Gangsta Night” at a school basketball game. And in Oneonta, a rural community between Binghamton and Albany, two students were filmed firing a gun at a picture of Martin Luther King Jr. while shouting racial slurs.

Even so, people who do not identify as white and who attended classes with Mr. Gendron at Susquehanna Valley High School pushed back against the notion that their community was prejudiced.

“No one else thinks like him around here. We’re not a racist town,” said Ms. McClain, 19, Mr. Casado’s girlfriend, who said she has known Mr. Gendron since the sixth grade.

After the shooting, she read most of the 180-page document Mr. Gendron posted online — but only in parts, she said, because she could not stomach it all at once.

“I never thought he could even think like that, let alone act upon it,” she said. “He’s a disgrace to his community, because we don’t think like that.”

Mr. Gendron had become increasingly isolated during the pandemic, when schools across the country shut down. After graduation last November, he told Mr. Casado and Ms. McClain that he was having trouble connecting with others at SUNY Broome Community College, where he had enrolled in an engineering program.

Documenting the months before the attack, Mr. Gendron wrote about his frequent trips to Broome County flea markets and area gun shops, his urges to commit suicide and his feelings of estrangement from his parents.

But in March, as the date he had originally selected for the attack drew near, he put it off, asking his imaginary readers to be patient with him. The reason he gave was a need to spend time with Mr. Casado.

“Sorry guys,” Mr. Gendron wrote. “I still want to make a good connection with Matt.”

If their friendship ever caused Mr. Gendron to question his racist worldview — if the obvious contradiction ever gave him pause — it was not revealed in his voluminous writings.

Mr. Casado now wonders how the person he had played baseball with in elementary school had hidden his extremist views. It was unclear from Mr. Gendron's online diary how he perceived Mr. Casado's ethnicity. Instead, his writings reflected only a fondness for him.

"I don't know why I would be his best friend if he felt that way," Mr. Casado said, "if he made it known that he was racist."