Peace group got start after temple killings

By Pam Powers
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MENOMONIE — A former white supremacist, Arno Michaelis, and Pardeep Kaleka, whose father was gunned down during the Sikh Temple attack in Oak Creek on Aug. 5, 2012, believe compassion and kindness can combat hatred and suffering.

Michaelis and Kaleka were the keynote speakers at the Upper Midwest Civic Engagement Summit Friday at UW-Stout. The two are part of Serve2Unite, a Milwaukee-based organization that works with students to teach about being human, peace and compassion.

The group started after the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin shootings to create a world where all faiths and people are recognized, respected and celebrated.

"It is essential we flood the world with kindness and compassion — especially toward people who seem to least deserve it," Michaelis said. "They need it the most."

In the late 1980s and early '90s, Michaelis was a founding member of a racist skinhead organization. He was a "reverend" of a self-declared "racial holy war" and lead singer of the "hate metal" band Centurian.

"Hurt people hurt people," Michaelis said. "Anyone harming someone else is doing it because they are hurting. I was hurting people because of my own suffering."

Growing up in an alcoholic household with emotional violence, he became a bully and a vandal and eventually a skinhead white supremacist, Michaelis said. Creating havoc gave him a rush, he said. Joining a racist culture angered people, which fed his adrenalin rush.

But after the birth of his daughter and the murder of two friends because of their violence, Michaelis changed his life. In 2010 he started speaking about his past, and he also wrote a book titled "My Life After Hate."

He met Kaleka after the Sikh shooting. Kaleka was seeking to understand why white supremacist Michael Wade Page killed six people in the temple shooting.

Both were nervous about the meeting, but they realized shortly afterward that they shared empathy and kindness toward each other.
The day of the shootings, Kaleka was on his way to the temple with his two children to drop them off for Sunday school. His daughter forgot a red folder, which made them run late.

He came upon the roadblocks set up by police and found out about the shootings.

"That day was the longest day of my life," said Kaleka, who co-founded Serve2Unite. "For some reason I don’t remember much about it."

He recalled feeling helpless at first, relieved when his mother came out of the temple and then angry about his father’s death.

It is important to stop hatred and suffering, he said. "I think the purpose of healing is healing."