

Police suspect victims in hate-crime reports

■ Authorities say two Portland women who reported numerous acts of bigotry and vandalism may have committed some of them

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COOLEY

Azalea Cooley briefly symbolized the fight against bigotry after her Southeast Portland home became the apparent target of numerous hate crimes.

But Portland police said in a news conference Monday that Cooley's roommate, Susan Soen, has been cited in one of the crimes and that Cooley and Soen are prime suspects in the others.

"I see this as a tragedy," said Kathleen Saadat, who spoke at the news conference in the Justice Center. "I don't think anyone here knows all the answers; but no matter what has happened, it's a tragedy."

Portland Police Capt. Dan Noelle said police had videotaped someone

leaving the women's home in Southeast Portland and setting fire to a cross on the lawn about 6 a.m. Sunday.

The videotape, according to Noelle, showed the person going back inside the

house after lighting the cross.

After serving a search warrant at the house Sunday evening, police cited Soen, 45, for initiating a false police report, a Class C misdemeanor. Police did not take her into custody.

Soen had been a line supervisor for the Multnomah County Jail for 15 years. She was placed on administrative suspension Monday.

No charges were filed against Cool-

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ey, also a former employee with county corrections.

Police are offering little information about the case, saying they are still investigating it. However, Noelle said police officers searching the house had found "evidentiary materials that were consistent" with materials used in some of the incidents.

"We have no evidence at this time to suggest (Cooley and Soen) are responsible for some of the previous acts, but they are still under investigation," said Sgt. Derrick Foxworth, the bureau's spokesman. "In light of the recent developments, we have to explore that possibility further."

During a heavily attended news conference, Noelle joined civil rights activists to talk about the case, which Portland police have investigated intensively since the first reported incident May 3.

In an interview with The Oregonian last Thursday, Cooley said she had been the target of unknown racists, because she is black and disabled. Cooley, who uses a wheelchair, said more than 20 hate crimes had been committed on her property, including death threats, cross-burnings and vandalism.

Members of the Anti-Bigotry Coalition, the Metropolitan Human Rights Commission, the Urban League and other civil rights groups rushed to give Cooley support. At one point, she received free counseling from a local sociologist.

Cooley could not be reached for comment Monday.

According to Noelle, detectives began considering the women as suspects when electronic surveillance of the premises was repeatedly thwarted. When two police decoys replaced Cooley and Soen in the house for a week, the hate crimes stopped, Noelle said. Police later added more surveillance to the house but did not tell the women.

the Portland Police Bureau \$25,000.

Noelle said he had never seen a case in which victims were the suspects in hate crimes against them.

"Although we have had one incident this year that appears to be self-inflicted," Foxworth added, "we must not forget the 700 other reported cases we have received from citizens who have been victimized based on the color of their skin, religious or political beliefs or their sexual orientation."

Monday's announcement stunned human rights activists, many of whom have said Cooley's case highlighted the need to protect citizens from bigotry.

Urban League president Darryl Tukufu and Metropolitan Human Rights Commission director Helen Cheek, who also spoke at the news conference, said they were saddened by revelations that the women might have staged some of the hate crimes.

On Sunday, more than 300 people from across the city and the state came out for a Southeast Portland rally and march to support Cooley. Tukufu, Saadat and Cooley were among the speakers denouncing hate and bigotry.

Scott Lively, communications director for the Oregon Citizens Alli-

ance, also attended Monday's news conference. Lively said Cooley's case was a hoax orchestrated by the No on 9 campaigners to rally support against the anti-gay ballot measure.

"This vindicates our position that the No on 9 campaign has been basing their position on fraud," Lively said. "I think there is high emotions on both sides, but when a black, crippled woman in a wheelchair starts burning crosses in her own yard, it's fraud and a sad day for the community. I think it exposes what we have been saying all along."

Lively drew hisses and jeers when he made the comments.

Sharon McCormick, crime-prevention coordinator for the King Neighborhood Association, rebuked Lively, telling him to look at police reports before he suggested hate crimes didn't exist.

Howard said she was pained by the bizarre twist in the Cooley case. "My biggest fear was that people would say that the No on 9 Campaign was putting on a dog-and-pony show," she said. "That was the part I hated the most. Nobody was trying to put anything over on anybody, unless Azalea and Susan were. And I'm not even sure about that. I just don't know."

CROWD