

First Amendment Essay Contest

L'Anita Weiler

Berkmar High School

Until I joined my school's newspaper staff, the first amendment meant nothing to me. My lack of understanding of its value stemmed from ignorance. I'd never tasted deprivation, so I couldn't appreciate freedom. Now, coupled with a powerful personal understanding and appreciation, I have developed a burning desire to restore first amendment rights to young people—particularly high school journalists.

My first article to be censored was a news story I stumbled upon. I was excited because I *knew* it was going to open some eyes, right a wrong—make a difference.

Somehow an administrator got wind of my story, and the teacher I'd quoted in it was called into his office and soundly rebuked for things she'd told me. After he'd vented sufficiently, the administrator told her she needed to “make her quotes more positive.”

When the teacher told me what had happened, I felt awful and assured her I would drop the story. She wouldn't hear of it. I'll never forget something she said then. “I'm proud of you for writing that story. I know how frustrating it is to know the truth and not be able to tell it.” Her voice broke. “I was once a journalist.”

Since that day, I have defined my ultimate goal as a journalist: to uncover truth and effect positive change. That's what the first amendment means to me—the right to voice truth, no matter how painful it is or how sorely it hurts someone's reputation. The more I fight censorship, the more frustrated I become with the hypocrisy of it. Schools seem to have lost their focus, their vision. They seek to foster students in a stimulating, thought-provoking learning environment, yet when student journalists try to point out faults or suggest change, they're shot down. Teachers emphasize independent, critical thinking, but students aren't allowed to practice it in real life. Classroom walls are covered in posters with messages that instill in young minds the importance of standing up for one's convictions, voicing one's opinion, not yielding to opposition.

We learn about writers, scientists, civil rights advocates, political leaders, and religious figures—whose greatness society *eventually* recognized—who fought against the blinded mainstream to bring to light what society could not or would not see. We study and extol their achievements in history class. We learn about their findings in science class. We read their thoughts and experiences in English class. But then we're expected to complete a little worksheet and close our textbooks. And when the bell rings, we move on to the next class. It's quietly understood—and, sadly, accepted—that those lessons, those rights for which the heroes of our past fought and died to pass on, don't apply to high school students.

Despite all their fancy mottos and idealistic mission statements, high schools no longer encourage independent thinkers. They strip students of their first amendment rights upon entering the door and keep them locked up until graduation. And sadly, most students have no idea what they're missing.

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Carolyn Crist

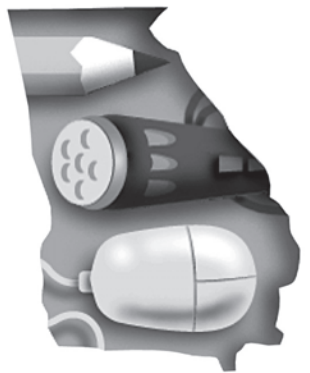
East Coweta High School

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution declares that “Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech or of the press ...” This guarantee of free press and speech is essential to all Americans for self-governance and democracy. The basic rights of free speech and free press are established in the Constitution, but the role they play in American life and in student publications continue to grow and change.

Our country was built upon the freedoms of speech and press when the colonies published pamphlets and newspapers against Britain and in favor of independence. The framers of the Constitution placed these important rights in the First Amendment to prevent totalitarianism and monarchism in the new republic. However, the Federalists used the Sedition Act in 1798 to limit criticisms against the government. Americans treasured free speech and voted against the Federalists in the Election of 1800. Cases such as *The New York Times v. Sullivan* have limited harmful forms of speech like libel. Today, the press must report on the day-to-day activities of the government and community, earning the nickname “The Fourth Estate.” Journalists are the “watchdogs” of the nation and must have the ability to gather essential information for public knowledge. The First Amendment protects the press’s right to publish information, no matter how journalists get it. However, the Supreme Court does not acknowledge the right of journalists to ignore subpoenas or have open access to all information. The press counters that the right to withhold information is important to attain sources and to assure confidentiality. The right to know has been expanded through the Freedom of Information Act and through the Electronic Freedom of Information Act. The press will continue to value the essential role that the freedom of the press plays in American life to remain informed and have a forum in which to express ideas.

The freedom of speech and of the press is also especially important on school campuses. Students have the ability to write about tough subjects and express opinions in editorials. Students also learn the experience of free speech for mainstream industry productions. However, in *Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier*, the Supreme Court ruled that the school administration could regulate and censor stories that can be offensive or inappropriate for students. At East Coweta High School, *Smoke Signals* publishes editorials on teen driving and illegal drugs. Students have used primary sources to conduct investigative reporting on a community controversy in court. The support and effort put into high school and college productions also help to expand the knowledge and value of freedom of press on campus.

The definition of free speech has been altered throughout history, but it remains important to the American public. Not only do the freedoms of speech and press profoundly affect Americans in everyday life, but they also allow mainstream and scholastic presses to do their historic jobs of informing the public effectively. The First Amendment must continue to be treasured as a democracy preserver, public informer, and rights defender.



GSPA

GEORGIA SCHOLASTIC
PRESS ASSOCIATION

Newspapers General Excellence Competition

Class AA

General Excellence

Grady HS - The Southerner

Achievement Winners

SW Ga. Academy - Warriors Word
Thomasville HS - The Bulldog Bulletin

Merit Winners

King's Academy- The Verve
The Lovett School- The Lion
Pace Academy- The Knightly News

Class AAA

General Excellence

Monroe Area HS - The Hurricane Watch

Excellent Winners

North Hall HS- The Forum
West Hall HS- Spartan Star

Achievement Winners

Riverwood HS- Raider's Digest

Merit Winners

Cairo HS- Red & Black
Shaw HS- Silver Star
Cass HS- The Trumpet

Class AAAA

General Excellence

Central HS - The Central Post

2004-05 Staff Awards

Excellent Winners

North Springs HS- The Oracle
Lakeside HS- The Lakeside Legend

Achievement Winners

Lee County HS- The Panoptic
Effingham Co. HS- The Forerunner
Chamblee HS- The Blue & Gold

Merit Winner

Lee County HS- The Lamp Post

Class AAAAA

General Excellence

Lassiter HS- The Laureate
Starr's Mill HS- The Prowler

Superior Winners

Peachtree Ridge HS- The Roar
Berkmar HS- The Liberty

Excellent Winners

Collins Hill HS- The Eagle's Voice
Union Grove HS- The Prowler
Norcross HS- The Advocate
Northview HS- The Messenger

Achievement Winners

Roswell HS- The Sting
Chattahoochee HS- The Speculator

Merit Winners

Sprayberry HS- The Stinger
Dacula HS- The Talon
East Coweta HS- Smoke Signals

Newsmagazine

General Excellence

Clarke Central HS - The Odyssey
Decatur HS - Carpe Diem

Excellent Winner

Wheeler HS - The Catalyst

Merit Winner

Woodland HS - Phoenix

Newspapers "Best of" Awards

Best News Coverage
Grady HS- The Southerner

Best Features Coverage
Clarke Central HS- The Odyssey

Best Editorial Page
Berkmar HS- The Liberty

Best Sports Coverage
Starr's Mill HS- The Prowler

Best Overall Design
Decatur HS- Carpe Diem

Best Front Page Layout
Northview HS- The Messenger

Best Use of Photographs
Central HS- The Central Post

Best Use of Advertising
Cass HS- The Trumpet

All Georgia Newspaper

Grady HS- The Southerner

Broadcast News General Excellence Competition

General Excellence

West Hall HS - Spartan Star Report

Superior Winner

Grady HS - GNN

Excellent Winners

Fayette County HS - Fayette This Morning
Brookwood HS - Brookwood Up Close

Achievement Winners

Lowndes HS - VNN
Rising Starr MS - Action News

Yearbook General Excellence Competition (2003-04 yearbooks)

All Georgia Yearbook

Johnson HS- Spirit

General Excellence Yearbooks
Arlington Christian School - Arlingtonian
Johnson HS - Spirit
Lassiter HS - Odyssey



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