

Fighting for Freedoms in Florida

The crowd had already formed when I arrived, and I felt a rush of adrenaline. I was going to be a part of something much larger than myself. Our voices were going to be heard. As my friends and I sat in the middle of the sea of rainbow, I could sense the energy but simultaneous poignancy that permeated the air. This was my first openly controversial protest, after the introduction of Florida House Bill 1557, entitled Parental Rights in Education but more commonly known as the Don't Say Gay bill. The bill was read, our opinions voiced, stories told, and chants repeated like a desperate prayer. I saw the pride flags being ripped as fighting broke out immediately behind me, and the cops stood at attention, watching in silence. Counter-protestors shouted homophobic slurs and cursed my friends for their existence and happiness. As they began to abandon their efforts and return to class, my friends and I continued to sit and hold hands in peaceful silence.

Soon, I found myself sitting in the principal's office being questioned. What the administration perceived as problematic political discourse was in fact my way of supporting my friends and the freedom to discuss their identities without restriction. Especially in the public school system, students need to read and talk about social issues in safe places instead of ignoring them or fostering hatred. In a society where we are supposedly becoming more accepting of differences- differences in race, culture, size, gender, and sexuality- it is appalling to me that my local school district and the state of Florida as a whole are further infringing on our right to freedom of expression this year by enforcing book bans. AP classes, which are vital for college applications and personal academic development, are also under scrutiny for covering diverse material, and student organizations are facing censorship.

As an International Baccalaureate student in Higher Level English Literature, I read Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* in my junior year. The novel details the tragic life of a young black girl, Pecola, living in America during the 1940s and constantly facing racism and abuse. The book introduced discussions that were difficult and uncomfortable, including the harsh realities of beauty standards and sexual assault for youth. However, I found that confronting these issues helped me grow as an empathetic individual, both towards myself and others. When asked if there were any students within our school who are like Pecola, I was encouraged to listen more

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compassionately to friends and strangers about their life experiences. Encountering stories about traditionally marginalized communities is necessary to promote peace and understanding in our society. However, due to one parent's complaint and an ensuing spiral of controversy, *The Bluest Eye* has recently been removed from all curriculums within my school district and is no longer available to students in classrooms, joining a long list of prohibited literature.

In my senior year, I once again found myself sitting in the principal's office. As a student leader of the TEDxYouth@PHUHS organization, I was required to meet with administration to get speaker topics approved this year, even though the team is not officially school-sponsored. A speaker discussing *The Bluest Eye* in relation to her own experiences, a student's parent exploring her family's immigration from a dictatorial regime in Uganda, and a man talking about his transgender experience have been flagged for review. I believe that every person should be allowed to share their story without being restricted. The power of TEDx as an organization is that it provides impetus for these stories to be shared and acts as an invitation for dialogue surrounding personal and universal experiences.

Despite the tragedy of this censorship, I have learned so much from participating in yet another school-wide protest, where students of all backgrounds and belief systems gathered in the courtyard to exercise our First Amendment rights to freedom of speech and assembly. Attending the February Pinellas County School Board meeting allowed me to share my opinions with local decision-makers in hopes of inspiring change.

Much of the news coverage surrounding this issue has been local, but with the support of organizations like the Florida Freedom to Read Project, fellow student activists and I are gradually reaching a larger audience of national news outlets. Recently, I was featured in the Washington Post to share my point of view regarding the importance of Advanced Placement classes in our public school system following the state government's threat to remove them (The Washington Post Article).

Ultimately, as a rising college freshman, I hope to participate in political discussions, social movements, and organized protests that amplify persecuted voices. Entering the field of foreign service, which aims to develop intercultural understanding and peace, I will continue to use my passion and experience to bring attention to threats to freedom of expression and put

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social change into motion.

Banning books is a recurring historic attempt to suppress points of view that do not support the mainstream agenda. It is important to me that my peers and I are exposed to well-written literature, but further that we can use stories like *The Bluest Eye*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Color Purple* to empower communities and teach children that they are loved, they are beautiful, and they are heard. Words can lift us up, provide comfort in common experiences, and change the world at large by changing each one of us.