

Free Speech, Free Press and the Future of Our Free Society

The events and judicial decisions very briefly reviewed in this series are in no way comprehensive but merely several key highlights from U.S. history of our First Amendment rights of free speech and a free press. Often times, it was the action of an ordinary citizen or group standing up for what they believed to be right that initiated positive change.

Many Americans continue to use freedom of speech and the press to bring attention to current injustices, that in some cases, echo those of the past.

One such group, Black Lives Matter, was originated by three women in response to the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African-American teenager in 2012. With highly visible actions including former NFL player, Colin Kaepernick kneeling before the national anthem, the movement has garnered national attention. Black Lives Matter continues to promote a “call to action and response to state sanctioned violence against black people, as well as the virulent anti-black racism that permeates our society.”

Not unlike Mary Beth and John Tinker, recent student leaders protested and formed the #NeverAgain movement standing up to advocate change. The movement grew out of the February 2018 school massacre of 17 students and staff members in Parkland, FL. The students used traditional and social media to help organize local and national student walk-outs and demonstrations calling for gun control legislation.

New Voices USA is a movement to guarantee meaningful press freedom for student journalists in public schools. In 2018, 30 years after the Hazelwood decision, the movement redoubled efforts to #CureHazelwood and worked to advocate for legislation to “restore the Tinker standard of student expression in America’s high schools” one state at a time. Currently, 13 states have passed New Voices legislation and the group’s ultimate goal is to extend these free press protections to include student journalists at public and private colleges and universities. As the Society of Professional Journalists stated in a resolution calling on schools to enact more balanced policies, “it is well-documented the Hazelwood censorship clause impedes an educator’s ability to adequately instruct and train students in professional journalistic values and practices.”

While we might disagree with some popular movements, our form of government is dependent on a public forum of open ideas and debate. “We the People” owe it to the First Amendment champions of the past to continually work together to ensure that the key principles of the First Amendment—free speech and a free press—are realized for all members of our society.

Look for news reports across all media platforms that inform of groups and individuals expressing their free speech rights. Imagine our nation without freedoms guaranteed in the First Amendment. What would we know about current social or political injustices? How would people stand up for the greater good in our society?

For more resources based on this year’s Law Day theme go to <http://tinyurl.com/lawday2019guide>.

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