

Vincent Munoz ([00:03](#)):

I think what we need to do is explain how our principles of free speech, free inquiry will help serve the cause of justice.

Betty Friedan ([00:12](#)):

The First Amendment and the constitutional freedom of speech and freedom of conscience, that is the bulwark of our democracy.

Bettina Aptheker ([00:22](#)):

There was a passion in what was being said, affirming what people considered a sacred constitutional right, freedom of speech and freedom of association.

Michelle Deutchman ([00:37](#)):

From the UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement, this is SpeechMatters, a podcast about expression, engagement, and democratic learning in higher education. I'm Michelle Deutchman, the Center's executive director and your host. By tackling the challenges arising on college and university campuses, we aim to highlight how each of our voices is important and why speech matters. Welcome to episode three. Today, we'll be diving deeply into an exploration of the alarming rise in book banning across the country. But first: Class Notes, a look at what's making headlines.

Michelle Deutchman ([01:11](#)):

These last few weeks, it seems everywhere you go, people are talking about free speech. Elon Musk's offer to buy Twitter has turned everyone into self-anointed free speech experts with lots of opinions about whether this acquisition will be better or worse for expression in America. The happiest place on earth has also been in the headlines, given the Florida legislature's decision to punish the Walt Disney Company for not falling in line in supporting the Parental Rights in Education Bill, otherwise known as the 'Don't Say Gay' bill.

Michelle Deutchman ([01:39](#)):

Ironic, coming from an administration that claims to carry the mantle of free speech, only to turn around and retaliate against Disney for speaking out. Closer to campus, we see the continued erosion of the tenure system, one of the fundamental pillars of academic freedom in higher education. Most recently, faculty across Mississippi learned of changes to how tenure is granted only after the decision had been made by Mississippi's Board of Trustees of State Institutions of Higher Learning. Sidestepping faculty input undermines the shared governance that is critical to the functioning of universities.

Michelle Deutchman ([02:12](#)):

If you are a legal eagle like me, you likely have read the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals decision, *Speech First v. Cartwright*, about discriminatory harassment and bias related incident policies at University of Central Florida. While I agree with the court's holding that the language in the discriminatory harassment policy is imprecise and over broad, and therefore has the potential to chill expression, I was disappointed that there was virtually no discussion of the intent behind these policies and what important roles they can and do play on campus.

Michelle Deutchman ([02:44](#)):

In his concurrence, at least Judge Story acknowledged that "insisting on compliance with the First Amendment should not prevent universities from exploring ways to lower the temperature on debate and help students learn how to listen and understand opposing viewpoints." I look forward to dedicating a separate episode to bias response teams and the legal issues that they raise. In the meantime, let's turn our attention to book banning and the devastating impact it's having on our public schools and libraries.

Michelle Deutchman ([03:17](#)):

Our guest today is Deborah Caldwell-Stone, director of the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom and the Executive Director of the Freedom to Read Foundation. For more than 140 years, ALA has been the trusted voice for academic, public, school, government, and special libraries, advocating for the profession and the library's role in enhancing learning and ensuring access to information for all.

Michelle Deutchman ([03:41](#)):

For nearly two decades, Deborah has helped libraries, librarians, and trustees address a wide range of intellectual freedom issues, including the censorship of books, library law and policy, and the privacy of library users' records. She is a former appellate litigator. If you've been following the many stories about book bans across the United States, you will be familiar with her name. She has been quoted everywhere. Her knowledge and expertise are very much in demand. Deborah, thank you for making time to talk with me today.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([04:10](#)):

Well, thank you for inviting me to be with you today, Michelle.

Michelle Deutchman ([04:13](#)):

As an avid reader and someone who growing up knew my local librarian well, I have been dismayed by the increased politicization of books and the assault on our country's classrooms and libraries. I'm eager for our listeners to learn from you about the current landscape and what can be done to protect our ability to access information. But before we jump right in, I want to ask you to tell us a little more about the American Library Association and your role in it.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([04:38](#)):

Well, ALA was founded in 1876 to assure, really to promote good library service for everyone and to enable library professionals, information professionals to provide that service. I have to say that it wasn't always the case that librarians and ALA promoted free access to information protection for the First Amendment. The First Amendment itself has a checkered history. But in 1939, the American Library Association adopted the first version of what's called the Library Bill of Rights.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([05:17](#)):

It's really a statement of what library users should expect from their libraries, especially in regards to access to information, the ability to access all kinds of ideas, to make choices about what one reads without our limitations being imposed upon that by the library itself. And since then, ALA has been engaged in the ongoing effort to preserve the right of every reader to read and make choices about their reading for themselves and to have the ability to access a wide range of information.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([05:50](#)):

The office I worked for, the Office for Intellectual Freedom, was founded in 1969 in response to a growing number of book censorship cases that were arising in the late '60s, as well as efforts to infringe on the privacy of library users. The library information project by the FBI, for example, sought records from college libraries. They wanted to find out what academics might be engaged in communist work, whatever.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([06:24](#)):

And so the office built up its programs around not only defending the freedom to read, defending library users' right to privacy, but to provide education programs to library workers so that they had the tools they need to defend the freedom to read on the ground and to educate the public about the importance of the freedom to read and to create awareness about the fact that despite the fact that we have the First Amendment, despite the promise that everyone should be able to make their own choices about their reading, there was still book censorship going on in the United States.

Michelle Deutchman ([06:59](#)):

Thank you. I really appreciate that. You kind of took us back in history. Before we jump into the First Amendment piece of things, I want to ask you about your time. I mean, you've been at the ALA now for two decades, and I'm wondering if you can give us a sense of how this moment vis-a-vis book bannings and censorship compares to others that you've experienced in the past 20 years.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([07:23](#)):

Well, we've traditionally always solicited reports from our members, from library professionals, from educators that reported on book censorship. We wanted to know what was happening, and we really formalized this in the late 1990s. And since then, we've been getting reports based on our request for voluntary reporting about two or three times a week would be our tradition. We might hear about one or two books a week being challenged. That changed last summer. We started getting a rising number of reports every week.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([08:04](#)):

And all of a sudden, with the beginning of the school year, we were getting three, four, five reports a day. Just really an amazing uptick in the number of challenges that were being reported to our office, a volume of challenge reports I had never witnessed in 20 years and certainly no one else in the office had ever seen. It's just really a remarkable phenomenon to observe all of a sudden an enormous number of demands to censor books.

Michelle Deutchman ([08:36](#)):

Yes, absolutely. It's incredibly troubling, and it's really important to have you sharing with us the real change that you've seen. It's one thing to read the numbers and another to talk to someone who's actually in your office, Intellectual Freedom, receiving those complaints, which, of course, leads to the next question which is, where are these bans coming from? Who? Why? What kinds of books are they seeking to ban and who is seeking to do the banning?

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([09:04](#)):

Well, what we're observing right now is what appears to be a well-funded and organized campaign among a number of groups to censor books in schools and libraries that is directly spurring this rise in the number of challenges being reported to our office. These groups are organizing local chapters, encouraging them to go to school board meetings, library board meetings and demand the removal of books that they disapprove of for any number of reasons, but with a particular focus on books dealing with LGBTQIA persons and their experiences, or focusing on the experiences of black, indigenous, or persons of color, particularly books that are deemed to be dealing with what's called critical race theory.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([09:59](#)):

But more often than not ends up focusing on works that deal with the lives and experiences of black persons or that reflect alternative viewpoints on the history of racism and slavery in the United States or that simply talk about the fact that systemic racism does exist in the United States. We're seeing challenges to all kinds of books, some intended for young people, some intended for adults, but with this particularly fine focus on books dealing with the experiences and lives of those who've been traditionally marginalized in our society.

Michelle Deutchman ([10:40](#)):

One of the things that I find sort of fascinating is that ALA and others are reporting, right, that the majority of voters actually oppose efforts to remove books from public libraries. If that's the case, why does the book ban supporting minority have the kind of power that it does in effectuating censorship and restriction of access to books?

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([11:04](#)):

Well, book banning is in some ways about power and who's controlling the narrative. I think when we see demands to remove books that reflect the lives of gay, queer, and transgender persons or that reflect the views of black persons about their experience of racism in the United States, we're seeing an effort to erase those voices, to impose a status quo on what's known to limit the ability to understand the experiences of those who have an opposing viewpoint.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([11:44](#)):

The book banning we're seeing really does have a strong political element to really limit what is known and what is acceptable in the way of understanding our history, our society, to uplift a status quo that may never have existed, but does exist in the minds of the advocates of this book censorship.

Michelle Deutchman ([12:09](#)):

One of the things that really struck me when you and I initially talked was this idea of you sort of saying it's all local, right? And that the people who are in power to make these kinds of decisions about books and access to information are local school boards and mayors and commissioners. And yet very few people show up to vote in those elections. I guess is one of the opportunities for sort of counteraction for people who oppose these kinds of bans to begin to run for office as well? What are things that people can be doing in their communities?

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([12:43](#)):

Well, as you say, the fact is, is that we do not have a federated or national library system and we don't have a federated or national school system. It is all local. It's your neighbors. It's the county officials, the

city officials who are running these boards that operate our schools and libraries, or there may be an elected board that runs the schools and libraries. When people don't participate in the process of electing board members, it provides an opportunity for a well-organized and determined group to elect individuals who have a particular agenda to pursue.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([13:28](#)):

We're seeing that happening now, both with school boards and library boards. Conservative activist organizations who want to remove books dealing with the LGBTQIA experience or who have a concern around what they call critical race theory are running for school boards and library boards and they're winning seats. They're frankly being successful at implementing an agenda that is erasing the voices of gay and black people from our libraries.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([14:01](#)):

We just learned this week that in Citrus County, Florida, they've decided not to have a Pride Month display because they're afraid of the controversy raised by a local group called Mass Resistance, which has an anti-LGBTQIA agenda. Similar decisions about not observing Pride Month or having Pride Month displays in children's rooms are happening in other communities in the United States. We're seeing some of the most ridiculous censorship I've ever heard about happen in schools.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([14:34](#)):

For example, elementary school biographies of civil rights heroes like Ruby Bridges and Rosa Parks are being challenged because "they make white children feel bad" or make them feel responsible for slavery, at least that's the account of what the book banners are removing these books from the hands of the students. And yet when you look at the books, they're written for first, second, third graders, perhaps beginning readers. Perhaps the real sin is that they used historical photographs that actually show the angry white adults harassing Ruby as she tries to enter her school as a six year old.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([15:16](#)):

To argue that a six year old can go through the experience of integrating a white school at the tender age of six, but that other six year olds can't know about or are incapable of understanding that experience is really a meretricious argument, I think, and really a demonstration that what we're seeing here is trying to impose one view of history, one way of thinking about history. The entire community, which if you think about it, is diametrically opposed to any idea of individual liberty or the promises of the First Amendment.

Michelle Deutchman ([15:53](#)):

Absolutely. It's kind of a revisionist history. And of course, I think many of our listeners can envision absolutely the iconic photographs that you're talking about. I feel like those are indelibly imprinted in my mind, both from my primary, secondary, and higher education experiences. I think one of the other things I want to ask is ALA has so many facets to it, but you have a legislative toolkit right now and a lot of other resources that folks can access.

Michelle Deutchman ([16:24](#)):

In general, how is other than responding individually to these situations and complaints, and we can talk about some of the things that have been happening across the country, what is sort of ALA's strategy to

respond to these very well-organized movements to ban not just books, but historical ideas and perspectives?

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([16:46](#)):

As a national organization, our best tool is to equip our local chapters, our state chapters, and our friends groups, the trustees who belong to ALA, with the tools they need to challenge censorship themselves. That involves providing resources about best practices, information about the law and how it applies to access to information in libraries, equipping them with advocacy tools so that they can talk effectively with elected officials. But in light of this onslaught of censorship that we're observing right now, we've actually begun to marshal special tools.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([17:29](#)):

You've mentioned a legislative toolkit. Right now we're seeing any number of laws being introduced in the states that would criminalize the provision of information about sex ed or gender or sexual identity to young people, or laws restricting what legislators call divisive concepts, but really amounts to censoring any accounts around racism, slavery, the experiences of black persons that don't reflect the views of the white legislators that are introducing these bills.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([18:07](#)):

The legislative toolkit is intended to equip our state chapters with the efficacy tools they need to work with legislators to help them understand the role of libraries, both in schools and in the community, and understand that the censorship of ideas isn't really a role that the government should be playing. But given the success of some of these organized groups in persuading local boards to engage in censorship, persuading legislators to introduce these laws or these bills, we've actually begun to organize a campaign that's intended to engage the public in the defense of the freedom to read.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([18:51](#)):

It's called Unite Against Book Bans. It's actually easy to find on the web. You just go to uniteagainstbookbans.org, and there everyone can find the tools and information they need to come together at a local grassroots level to begin to address this impulse towards censorship. We've done an enormous amount of research, including polling, like other polls that have looked into this issue. What we found is the vast majority of Americans oppose book banning. They understand censorship as being the antithesis of freedoms that are promised by our democracy and are harmful to our democracy.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([19:37](#)):

We're hoping that by initiating this campaign that we'll be able to give individuals the tools they need to mobilize in their communities to invite their friends and neighbors to join in the fight against book censorship.

Michelle Deutchman ([19:52](#)):

Terrific. We're going to make sure that Unite Against Book Bans and a lot of the resources that you mentioned, Deborah, are in our episode notes so that people have them at their fingertips. One thing I really have been thinking a lot about is sort of the privilege of growing up in a city like Los Angeles. I know that you're talking to me today from ALA headquarters in Washington, DC and that you're typically in Chicago, right? These are places where we don't see much book banning.

Michelle Deutchman ([20:21](#)):

I'm wondering if you can share with us some of the anecdotes and some of the things that you've heard about in terms of what it's like to be a librarian or a reader in a smaller town or in a more rural part of America. I know Washington Post just had a big story about Llano County in Texas, and you directed me to some information about Gillette, Wyoming. I'm hoping that you can just maybe share with us some of the experiences that individuals are having so that people can really understand the impact that this is not just having on the learning environment, but on people's lives and livelihoods.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([20:55](#)):

Well, absolutely. You mentioned Gillette, Wyoming. There's a well... I won't say well-organized. Let's say it's a determined group of individuals, again, members of an advocacy group who are determined to remove the LGBTQIA themed materials from the Campbell County Public Library. They've gone as far as to file criminal complaints against the library and the library workers who staffed it, many of whom have lived in the community for decades.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([21:31](#)):

The impact of having criminal charges filed against you and to realize that you might have to leave the community you're in or might become impossible to continue to live in the community you're in because of the belief of a small group of individuals that some subjects are beyond the pale and not be reflected in the collections of a public library is enormously stressful. You're living under a cloud for days, if not weeks, not knowing if you might have to go hire an attorney, not knowing if you might have to go to court to defend yourself for simply providing young people access to books dealing with puberty, health, changing bodies, or gender or sexual identity.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([22:21](#)):

All materials that are perfectly legal, sold in bookstores, sold through Amazon, that anyone can access if they have a cellphone and an account for an e-book. But libraries exist, of course, for young people and adults who don't have access to those resources who want to be able to find the information they need in a public library. I almost can't describe it because I sit in the comfort of an office in Chicago knowing that I have access to the information I need, but I can only observe and support the library and who are going through this kind of experience.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([22:57](#)):

Now, the good news about what happened in Gillette is that the special prosecutor who was appointed to investigate these charges that claimed that the library and the librarians were pandering obscenity to minors, eventually determined that no law had been broken, refused to bring any charges, refused to carry out the complaints.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([23:18](#)):

But it's a phenomenon we're beginning to see across the country that when there is a determined group challenging books in a community, whether it's in the school or the public library, if they don't feel that they're getting satisfaction, we've seen at least four or five incidents across the country where they've actually filed criminal charges trying to get the books out of the library. In other cases where we've seen the library board or school board taken over by partisan advocates, which is really the case in Llano County, Texas, individuals who were challenging books were actually appointed to the library board.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([23:57](#)):

They've cut off access to e-books, which has had an incredible impact on retirees and individuals who are restricted to their homes. Especially during a time of pandemic, they had been relying on e-book resources to read all kinds of books. But because this library board dislikes one or two books in the e-book collection, they simply cut off access altogether for the entire community. One librarian in Llano County who stood up to this, who refused to remove books from the shelves of the library, ended up losing her job.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([24:35](#)):

We do have resources to support librarians who stand up in defensive of intellectual freedom, and we provide them with resources and even financial assistance where that is helpful. But it just is a perversion of the very purpose of a public library, which is supposed to be a community institution, and a perversion of the role of a library trustee, who is supposed to be acting for the best interest of everyone in the community and not advancing a partisan agenda to the detriment of everyone else's access to information in the community.

Michelle Deutchman ([25:09](#)):

I mean, what you're describing is really quite terrifying. And not to make a literary reference, but it does make me think about what Bradbury painted in Fahrenheit 451 in terms of people trying to root out ideas. We're talking about something way more significant than individual books. I mean, I know for me, reading has been a lifeline for me during the last two years especially. And to be eliminating all e-books, I mean, that's like the equivalent sort of closing a whole form to people in order to preclude people from being able to access one or two things.

Michelle Deutchman ([25:46](#)):

It's really kind of overly broad and very, very concerning. I think sort of that leads us a little bit into kind of the First Amendment piece of all this, where I think a lot of people are wondering, "Wait! How is it possible, right? We have the First Amendment. We're not supposed to be able to have school boards ban books. Government's not supposed to be able to make these kinds of decisions." I think it'd be good for us to talk a little bit about the one Supreme Court case about book banning in schools. It's known as the Pico case. It's from 1982. It's Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico.

Michelle Deutchman ([26:25](#)):

The case was initiated because a conservative activist group called Parents of New York United compiled a list of books that they wished to have removed from school libraries, because they believed them to be "anti-American, anti-Christian, anti-Semitic, and just plain filthy." The titles included Slaughterhouse-Five by Vonnegut, Go Ask Alice of anonymous authorship, Black Boy by Richard Wright, Soul on Ice by Eldridge Cleaver. Students then brought a case against the school board, right?

Michelle Deutchman ([26:55](#)):

They argued that their First Amendment rights were violated because the First Amendment includes their right not just to express themselves, but also to receive information. The court ruled in favor of the students, which is the good news, five-four, but the bad news is that all nine justices wrote opinions. There's not a lot of clarity. The case has been interpreted to allow school boards some discretion in

choosing to remove books. And of course, the devil is in the details, right? School boards are not allowed to violate students' rights because they don't like an idea in a book.

Michelle Deutchman ([27:26](#)):

But what they can do is look to two different standards that were discussed in the Justices' opinions that may allow for removal, and one of those standards is pervasive vulgarity and the other standard is lack of educational suitability. To add insult to injury, both standards were only supported by four justices, so there, again, was not a majority. I'm wondering, Deborah, if we can take each one at a time to sort of look at the standard and maybe you could showcase how it's being applied at this moment in time and maybe we should start with pervasive vulgarity.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([28:00](#)):

Well, the fact is that in setting out these standards, they failed to define them in the case. It's been really up to other lower courts to apply these standards the best they can. Pervasive vulgarity has been likened to harmful to minors, obscenity to minors. But in fact, it's been used to describe any amount of material that references sex or uses profanity, by school boards at least. Sometimes it amounts to magic words. They don't like a book because it references gay or transgender persons and they say, "Well, that's sex. That's pervasively vulgar. Sex is vulgar and we can remove the book for that reason."

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([28:51](#)):

When in fact if you look at the book and it's a memoir of growing up gay, or it's a nonfiction book talking about protecting one's self from abuse in a gay relationship, which is one of the books that's been especially targeted this year. George Johnson's All Boys Aren't Blue has been targeted, when in fact it is a book, that would never have been found, in my opinion, should never have been found pervasively vulgar. These are both... Educationally unsuitable is the same thing. Again, not really well-defined by the courts. Up to the judge or a jury in the case to make their determination about what that means.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([29:38](#)):

What we found is a practical matter. It comes down to facts. What demonstrates that something is educationally and suitable, or what's demonstrates what's pervasively vulgar? We would argue that it comes very close to the standard that represents obscenity for minors or harmful to minors, which is unremitting focus on period material or profanity. Educational suitability, again, does it have some literary value? Does it have some political or social value? Does it have artistic value? Can it illuminate an issue for a student? Does it support the curriculum in any way?

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([30:21](#)):

But as I said, is we found that often these phrases are used like magic words to justify the removal of the book. It's a pretense really when there are other motivations for that book. That's what we look for in these cases. We look to the original comments of a school board when they want to remove a book. Often there are comments from the podium, remarks during public comment periods that might actually reveal the true motivations of the board in removing the books that they don't like.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([30:57](#)):

They think the books represents a form of communism, or they don't like the author because the author is black. And as a result, those kinds of commentary can feed into a favorable decision in favor of the students, which is in fact what happens with the Pico case.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([31:17](#)):

The board had made so many comments about their dislike for the ideas expressed, the viewpoints expressed by the authors of the books targeted by the group that it became very easy to see that they were not removing the books because they were educationally unsuitable or because they were pervasively vulgar, but simply because they didn't like Kurt Vonnegut's books. They didn't like *Catcher in the Rye* because it offered an alternative view on society they didn't like.

Michelle Deutchman ([31:47](#)):

Deborah as a lawyer myself, I can sometimes get caught deep in the weeds of these decisions. I don't want that to happen at the expense of the larger impact of the Pico case and how it changed First Amendment doctrine and how we think about access to information. I'm hoping that you can sort of speak to that piece of it now that we've done a little bit of the nitty-gritty.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([32:08](#)):

Absolutely. The great thing about the Pico decision is it's the first time that the Supreme Court expressed the idea that the right to receive ideas is a necessary part of the freedom of speech. In fact, the direct quote is "the right to receive ideas is a necessary predicate to the recipient's meaningful exercise of his own rights of speech, press, and political freedom." Now, it goes on to say that students are beneficiaries of this principle, which we fight to uphold when we fight a book ban.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([32:42](#)):

But think about it, it's a positive expression of the ability of the individual to receive the words of others, to read books, to be able to entertain the ideas of others, and that's a fundamental right, that's a necessary component of freedom of speech that's promised by the First Amendment. And that's bloomed into other decisions that have affirmed the right of the individual, not only to receive ideas, but to be able to enter a library, a public library, and access freely all the ideas that are available through the books and resources that are available in a public library.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([33:21](#)):

It really is a very seminal decision in support of not only the individual's freedom to read, but the individual's freedom to access information provided through libraries and has been the foundation for protecting that right both in school libraries and public libraries ever since it was handed down in 1982.

Michelle Deutchman ([33:43](#)):

I think the thing is, is 1982 wasn't that long ago when you think of the whole history of this country. I know that when I prepared for our conversation, I was surprised to think that until that time, that right hadn't been so explicitly protected. Let's hope that we're going to continue to protect it as we move forward.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([34:03](#)):

Absolutely. It's so important to be able to make one's own choices. It's the thing that bothers me most about these campaigns is it's telling you how to think and what to think about. It's just not the role of the government to do that.

Michelle Deutchman ([34:19](#)):

Right. I mean, you kind of caught them at their own game. But at the same time, it's a very labor intensive process, right? I mean, the law is, in many ways, a very blunt instrument here. Because those terms are sort of vague and ambiguous, you have to go into litigation and then start rereading the record. Of course, then there's the concern, which is what if people are successful about using their pretextual reasons for eliminating certain books or ideas or authors from libraries.

Michelle Deutchman ([34:45](#)):

One thing that came up recently was the book *Beloved* by Toni Morrison became extremely politicized in the Virginia governor's race, and there was a lot of words thrown around about obscenity and *Beloved*. I was wondering if you could speak to that and sort of to this idea of how headlines can impact the narrative of what is actually happening in a book and in a community.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([35:12](#)):

Well, I think we've all seen the story about how this one parent was distressed about the fact that her son had to read *Beloved* for his AP English class. He was 17, rising 18 year old, getting ready for college, but he found certain passages in *Beloved* disturbing. Toni Morrison's book does not pull any punches about the horrors of slavery or the sexual abuse that took place under it or the depravity that took place under slavery. It is literature that is intended for older students and for adults to read, but it was felt that it was part of the AP curriculum. She challenged the book at the school board level.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([36:02](#)):

The school board said, "This is an AP English book. We find that it's suitable for 17 and 18 year olds to read," and they retained it in the curriculum. She was dissatisfied with that and she continued to pursue a challenge at the state school board level, was turned away there. And then ultimately, she persuaded legislators to introduce a bill that would allow her to remove the book from the classroom. Her particular concern was that she didn't want her son stigmatized, because there was a rule in place that she could opt her son out of the assignment and get an alternative assignment.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([36:38](#)):

But she didn't want her son to have to suffer through the fact that he was the only one not reading the book. A bill was introduced and actually passed that would have required schools to identify sexual content in books, allow for its removal. The governor at the time in Virginia rejected that bill. Well, many years later, the mother shows up again in an ad for Governor Youngkin, or now Governor Youngkin, but at the time he was running for office.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([37:11](#)):

She made it an issue and the headline was that this book, this obscene book that dealt with bestiality and rape and sexual abuse, the murder of a child was being given to innocent high schoolers and previous administration had refused to do anything about this and Youngkin would address it. It became

part of the campaign and a wedge issue, we believe, for the Republicans in that election. It contributed to the Youngkin's success in winning the governor's seat as well.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([37:50](#)):

But the problem is, is when you look at *Beloved*, yes, there are these difficult passages that deal with sexual abuse, that deal with the depravity under slavery, and ultimately the murder of a child. But you pull back and you see this work of literature, this poetry prize winning novel that deals with the harms of slavery and its impact on American history that so many people have loved. We have now this effort across the country. *Beloved* has been challenged so many times in the last year based on those headlines alone and the misinformation about the book that's been propagated through social media.

Michelle Deutchman ([38:33](#)):

I mean, I think life is really difficult. My understanding of the purpose of literature is to share those difficulties both so people can have a better understanding of them and people who've experienced them can know that their experiences are seen and heard. One of the points of literature, of course, is to be able to highlight the things that are difficult in life and then to teach young minds how to interpret and cope with them. It's very clear from what you've talked about the impact that book banning and restrictions of access to information can have at primary and secondary school levels.

Michelle Deutchman ([39:13](#)):

But I do want to spend a minute asking you about higher education because many of our listeners are higher education professionals. I'm wondering if you can just sort of articulate how what's happening now in elementary and secondary schools is ultimately going to impact higher education and life beyond.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([39:34](#)):

What we're hearing from our colleagues who work in academic libraries and in higher education is that there's a deep concern that young people will not be prepared with the analytical thinking, the critical thinking skills that they need to succeed in college. We actually saw a story in just the last few weeks that schools that pull books like *Beloved* that are part of the AP curriculum out of the reading list will actually lose their ability to offer AP courses and deprive those students of the opportunity for the deeper learning that takes place in AP classes that better prepares them for college, that actually provide some with college credit.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([40:21](#)):

We're seeing a narrowing of educational opportunities. We understand about what it means to become an educated person. It means that you just don't acquire the same skills to think critically about ideas, to engage with ideas that you may not even hold yourself, but to understand the arguments, and to deepen and strengthen your own beliefs as a result of having to grapple with ideas that are not your own. We're really concerned about this wave of book banning and what it would mean for the ability of students in those school districts to really get into the higher education institutions they want to join or to pursue the careers they'd like to pursue in the future.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([41:11](#)):

Because when you limit books to a very narrow line of beliefs and ideas, you don't really have education. What you have is indoctrination, which I find totally ironic. I mean, that's the cry of the book banners. They feel that children are being indoctrinated, when in fact their very activity results in indoctrination and a very narrow band of thought around race, gender, and politics these days.

Michelle Deutchman ([41:40](#)):

I was literally going to say the same thing, that it seems like an incredible irony that what they're actually creating is like a chilling of knowledge and speech and ideas, which ultimately is resulting in a form of indoctrination. I think that's one of the things I'm so happy we were able to highlight for today's listeners, which is the really broad impact that this is going to have, not just across learning environments, but across society at large.

Michelle Deutchman ([42:08](#)):

As you know, we're a Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement, and I always like to ask our guests this question which is, what is something people can do today to advance free speech and civic engagement?

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([42:21](#)):

I'll circle back to the fact that all library politics are local. All school politics are local. We've had two years living under a pandemic and we've kind of disengaged from our neighbors, but it's time to start going to school board meetings. It's time to start going to library board meetings. It's time to know who is running for library board and school board seats because they're the ones who are making decisions about what's available in school libraries, what's available in public libraries.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([42:50](#)):

And as I mentioned before, we're seeing actual campaigns by advocacy groups who have particular agendas, whether it's an anti-gay, queer agenda, an anti-critical race theory agenda, take over boards and implement a policy of censorship that narrows the availability of information in the community that tells people what to think in violation of all of our First Amendment rights to access information in public libraries. Start attending meetings. Vote in elections. Know who you're voting for. It's the best thing you can do. If you can go even further, speak up.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([43:32](#)):

Go to public comment sessions at board meetings and speak out against censorship. Engage with your networks. Talk to your church group, your civic groups, your neighbors, and encourage them. As I mentioned before, Unite Against Book Bans is intended to provide a platform for this kind of activity, but you don't need to join a campaign to do it yourself. I think we just need good old fashioned democracy to take hold again and to encourage people to participate as voters, as community members to speak up and fight censorship.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([44:09](#)):

When we observe a challenge take place, and challenge is the term we use for a demand to remove a book from a library, whether it's in a school or a public library, when we observe a challenge takes place in the community, it often starts with a very fierce advocate or group of advocates arguing against a

book, putting it in worse light, only reading small passages and trying to represent the entirety of a work of literature by a few words of profanity or a sex scene.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([44:40](#)):

But when other people show up, when they speak out in favor of the book as a whole that highlight the fact that it's a work of literature, that it benefits young people to have access to a variety of ideas, to gain empathy and understanding, that they want their own students to be able to have access to accurate information about health, sex, and gender identity, those efforts at censorship fail. I can only encourage everyone to step out and take an interest in what have often been small elections.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([45:14](#)):

As you said before, when there's only eight to 10% of the community voting in the election, you can muster together 100 or 150 supporters and sway that election and implement an agenda that harms the entire community's access to information, and that impairs young people's ability to gain the kind of critical thinking and educational skills they need to succeed in the world.

Michelle Deutchman ([45:41](#)):

That's such a terrific answer, both because it's so detailed and specific, and also because oftentimes people say to me, "It's so overwhelming, all of the challenges that democracy is facing right now. It's hard to know what to do," and you've really laid out things that anybody can be part of, anybody who's a reader, whether you're a parent or a teacher or a student, whatever your role is, if you care about reading and you care about information, and this is an important issue. Deborah, I truly appreciate your taking the time to share your insights and experiences.

Michelle Deutchman ([46:13](#)):

I think for a lot of our listeners, this may serve as a wake up call, which will hopefully galvanize them to take action, especially in their local communities, as you have suggested. The work you're doing is so vital, and I am grateful for the opportunity to learn from you. In two weeks, we'll be talking with John King, former Secretary of Education in the Obama administration and current president of The Education Trust, about trends in higher education policy. Thanks again, Deborah.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone ([46:39](#)):

Thank you so much, Michelle. I really appreciate the opportunity to talk about this. It's so important.