The war against intellectual choice is a war against thinking. Read this book and you will understand the importance of fighting for and defending intellectual freedom and choice.

—STEPHEN KRASHEN
AT THE SCHOOLHOUSE GATE
Lessons in Intellectual Freedom
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Gloria Pipkin & ReLeah Cossett Lent

FOREWORD BY SUSAN OHANIAN

HEINEMANN
PORTSMOUTH, NH
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As the 1997 school year drew to a close, it was time to begin putting together the long-awaited senior issue, a special edition full of ads and funny pictures. Since this issue never goes to competition, the journalistic rules are bent, allowing strange layouts and personal columns written by anyone who has something to say to the senior class. The seniors work hard, gathering hundreds of old photographs, most submitted by parents of their children doing things like kissing the family dog on the mouth or putting a bowl of spaghetti over their heads when they were three years old. They write sports summaries and the highlights of the year and in general capture the unique flavor of their class.

This year, seniors were plotting the perfect front-page picture, finally deciding on a popular tourist attraction at the beach, the Grand Maze, a life-size labyrinth. Vern Miller, a photographer with the News Herald and a longtime mentor for our staff, photographed the students, as he had done for several years (once as a senior bungee jumped in his cap and gown, once as seniors jumped into the school pool in their caps and gowns). This shoot would be comparatively easy. It was a hot day and hard work, but we stayed several hours, getting just the right pose so we could use the caption “Class of ’97: Mazed and Confused” under a full-page picture of the graduating seniors excitedly snaking through the maze.
The issue ended up being thirty-two pages, the largest paper we had ever printed and the most expensive, with over a hundred ads from parents, friends, businesses, and churches congratulating individual seniors. We were drumming up ads from everywhere when, a few days before layout week, one of the editors submitted an ad from a gay and lesbian support group. I didn’t question the ad when it was brought to me, but I did read the copy and saw that it merely announced a meeting. The next day, however, I got a call from the typesetter at the News Herald, a woman who often worked on our ads. She asked me if I had seen the “gay” ad. I told her I had. She said she didn’t think the ad was appropriate for a school newspaper and that she was going to talk to the production manager about it. I couldn’t understand her objection or her obvious distress about the ad. Perhaps I had not read the ad correctly; maybe there was something in it that was in some way offensive, something I had missed. I asked the student who had submitted the ad what it said. She told me exactly what I remembered. I then questioned her about the “gay” group. She said they were a group of students (and their parents, too, she thought) who met to discuss issues important to gay and lesbian students, much like a therapy group. Satisfied that the ad was legitimate, I started to call the News Herald but I suddenly wondered if the typesetter would notify Husfelt and misrepresent the ad, so I decided to call him first.

When I described the ad to Husfelt, he didn’t hesitate. “No,” he said. “We will absolutely not run that ad. You know better than this, ReLeah.” He addressed me as if I were an unruly child. I was astounded. I hadn’t asked for permission, yet he denied it. It was the same tone he had used when we discussed Of Mice and Men, a tone that implied that I was not quite bright enough or sensitive enough to understand the facts, a tone that cautioned me to stop being rebellious. Ignoring his implied message, I plowed ahead into what I knew from previous experience would be rock-hard ground. I told Husfelt I was concerned that his act would be seen as discrimination against this particular group of students, because we ran ads announcing the meetings of every other group, including churches. He said he was responsible for all students and pointed out possible consequences. “What if a student attended the meeting and was persuaded to become gay as a result of the meeting? What if there was a riot at the meeting place because of the ad?”

Indeed, I had not thought of those possibilities—and I couldn’t believe he was thinking of them either. I reminded him that this was the first ad we had ever turned down from any group of students. The more I tried to explain, the more adamant he became. It was my responsibility, he said, to give his mandate to the editors at the News Herald that night.

As usual, the newspaper staff and I met in the break room for pizza to go over the issue before laying it out. The editors were exuberant. It was the senior
issue, graduation was in a few weeks, and they were on the threshold of a new life. Not much could have doused their spirits that night, but I suspected that I was about to do just that. I told them what their principal had said about not running the ad. They were furious. At first they refused to acknowledge his order, which they considered inhumane and ridiculous. In the haze of their almost-adulthood, they simply said, “We’ll do it anyway.”

They saw the act of censorship as a slap in the face to the students in the gay community, an overt act of discrimination. “Besides,” they said, “how will we tell the students who bought the ad that we can’t run it? Will we just give their money back and tell them their ad isn’t one we want?” I had no answers for their questions and felt I had let them down by simply delivering the message.

“Calm down and talk to Mr. Husfelt tomorrow after you have time to get your thoughts together,” I advised them. They filed out of the room, deflated but still angry.

My old debate coach had taught me the meaning of a trite phrase that we often used when debating, and I was experiencing it now: I was painfully “caught on the horns of a dilemma.” My heart was with the students, but I had just received a clear order from my principal. Every thought in my swirling mind dug the horns in deeper, so I went into the editorial room of the News Herald to talk to the editor-in-chief, Steve Bornhoft. He listened thoughtfully as I explained my reluctance to censor the ad, then told me that, in his opinion, the principal, as publisher, did have control over advertising content. Bornhoft did not, however, believe that the principal had control of editorial content, especially since ours was a student-run paper.

I questioned Husfelt’s decision, but I didn’t question Bornhoft’s interpretation of the law, although I now know that if I had called the Student Press Law Center I would have been given different advice. All I knew then was that Bornhoft was an experienced editor and a well-respected, fair person. I felt certain he had given me his best shot at the truth.

I gathered the students together and relayed what Bornhoft had said. They were still not happy. Nor was I, but there seemed to be nothing left to do. Layout week is not a time to deal with philosophical questions. The students were exhausted and burdened with the hundreds of decisions that had to be made instantly for a paper of this size. They had to move ahead and concentrate on the night’s task, or the paper might not get printed before graduation. They decided they would talk to the principal the next day, demand an explanation for the censorship, and deal with the problem then. As I watched them handle the adversity, I admired and loved them for their maturity and professionalism.

The next day the students called Husfelt’s secretary and asked for an appointment. By the end of the period he had not called them back, so they
left to go to the News Herald to begin another long night’s work. Husfelt finally called. I told him the students wanted to talk about his decision involving the gay support-group ad. He immediately became angry. “They don’t need to talk to me about this. We settled this yesterday.” I told him he might want to talk to the editors about his decision. He told me that I should have “taken care of this matter. I told you no, and that should have been it.”

I then said something that sealed my fate, although I did not realize it until a few weeks later. Naively, I told him that I had sought the advice of Steve Bornhoft, who agreed that Husfelt did have the authority to remove the ad. I’ve always thought of myself as fairly perceptive, but I missed the boat on this one. Husfelt became furious, yelling into the phone, “Why did you talk to Bornhoft?” He reiterated that he had already told me we couldn’t run the ad, and there was no need to consult anyone else, not even an expert.

“What was I supposed to say to the students?” I asked. “They were prepared to run the ad anyway.”

“If they needed to talk to anyone, they should have called me,” he said, “not Bornhoft.” And, he insisted again I should have taken care of the problem myself. The chain of command was clear: Husfelt tells me, I tell the students, they obey—no questions asked, no thinking required. My debate coach might have reminded him that sometimes the best place to be is on a set of horns rather than standing nearby in danger of being gouged.

Since I believe that real education entails asking questions, embarking on a never-ending journey for answers, I couldn’t relate to Husfelt’s military-like approach. I had never met an administrator who was unwilling to even consider my professional opinion, and I didn’t appreciate being treated like a green cadet. I had given him the benefit of the doubt and all I got for my trouble was a command to keep marching in cadence. By the end of the conversation Husfelt had calmed somewhat, and in an effort at reconciliation, I suppose, he said very sincerely, “You know in your heart what’s right, ReLeah. This is the right thing to do.” In fact, I did know what was right, and it wasn’t censoring an ad for a group of young people who were trying to announce a support group meeting just because their sexual orientation was different from his. We were once again facing each other across the chasm.

Even when the sponsor of the Bay High School paper told Husfelt that he might be inviting a lawsuit by censoring the ad, he replied, “That’s what insurance is for.”

As it turned out, the students did not try to contact Husfelt. I don’t know what they told the group that had purchased the ad, but I am still embarrassed that they had to tell them anything at all.

We were proud of the giant senior issue, but the removal of the ad marred our pleasure. It glared from every page, a chilling definition of censorship.
Unfortunately, the senior issue was not without complaints. In one feature, called “What Ifs,” seniors submitted items that they thought would never happen, such as “What if half of Mosley’s females didn’t go to tanning beds?” (in an attempt to say that half of the females did go to tanning beds). And the predictable “What if Mosley actually knew what color green we were?” Many of the items were directed at specific students. “What if [the best soccer player in the school] never learned to play soccer?” We had been careful to check out all of the “What ifs,” but since it was an exercise in irony, it was difficult to authenticate each entry. The item about the cheerleading sponsor did make me pause however. She was attractive and popular with the students and had a flair for dressing youthfully and fashionably. When we received an entry that said “What if [the cheerleading sponsor] wore a turtleneck and an ankle-length skirt at the same time?” I asked students on the staff who had her as a teacher, including a cheerleader, if they thought she would be offended by the remark. I didn’t know her well enough to be sure. They said they thought she would be flattered, or at least would think it was funny.

She did not think it was funny. She called from home the day the paper was distributed. Humiliated over the item in Making Waves, she had left school upset and angry. I felt terrible about the incident, apologized to her, and tried to reassure her that the students would never do anything intentionally to hurt her. I also told her that the item had been submitted by someone in the senior class, not written by the staff. She insisted it had been provided by a student who wanted retaliation for something, and that we had played right into his hands.

In addition, the senior class sponsor, Ray Wishart, a man the students insisted had made disparaging remarks about this particular class in public, was angry at an item that said, “What if Mr. Wishart liked our senior class?” When I heard that he was upset over the column, Ben and I approached him in an effort to understand his concerns. I finally ended up apologizing to him as well, telling him that neither the students nor the sponsors had intended any harm.

I called a meeting of all the editors and told them what had happened. One of the co-editors for the following year suggested that we not print “What Ifs” again, and everyone agreed. The consensus was that, while we did not intend to be unkind to anyone, sometimes in the late hours at the News Herald, especially with an issue of this size, we may not have examined the column with sufficient sensitivity. We reminded ourselves of the power of the press and decided to use some of our funds to send flowers to the cheerleading sponsor and buy cookies for the senior class sponsor.

In my eight years of sponsoring the paper, we had experienced very few incidents of this type. My position was that you take risks when you publish a
paper, and you sometimes make mistakes. People may not like what we write, but as long as our reporting is accurate and objective, we could feel good about our role as journalists. Because the senior issue was a different type of publication, a “fun” issue, it was more difficult to adhere to those rules, but I knew we would look more carefully at submissions for next year’s senior issue.

Overall, I had heard few negative remarks, so I was surprised when Husfelt passed out a survey to teachers. In it he asked the teaching staff, not the students, questions about Making Waves, such as if they thought its content was appropriate for students and whether the faculty thought the students actually read the paper. I remember thinking that the only thing inappropriate was asking faculty what students thought, and while the familiar censorship tingle was moving through my bones, I didn’t really anticipate any serious opposition, especially with our recent awards in hand.

We held our end-of-the-year newspaper banquet at a local restaurant overlooking the bay. It was a night of hugs, tears, flowers, and exchanged college addresses; the end of one magical era, yet a time of hope for the next year. “Old” editors offered advice and encouragement while “new” editors looked in awe at their journalistic idols, imaging themselves one year from now and yet unable to conceive the imagining. This year the editors had planned a slumber party at the condo of one of the parents for the almost all-girl staff, so the party was to continue into the night. I was tired and had several days of school left without the students, so I went home, sad that some of my favorite people were moving out of my life, yet satisfied that I had given them something important to take with them—the sure knowledge of their own abilities. It was a bittersweet epilogue, one I had become used to reading through the years.
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