

A place to be heard **TOWN SQUARE****YOUR VIEW****Lehigh students show First Amendment is in good hands**

**O**ur First Amendment rights are in good hands

Quick — how many of the five First Amendment freedoms can you name? In a poll taken in summer, 39 percent of those surveyed could not name one. A little more than half named freedom of speech, but only 16 percent remembered freedom of the press. My media law students at Lehigh University do better than the average American, but they, too, overlook some of our most fundamental rights — the right to petition the government for redress of grievances, for example, and freedom of assembly.

During Colonial times, unlawful assembly could bring prison time or even death, so an elm tree in Boston Common became a place where people met to express their frustration with British rule and to plot for independence. Dubbed the liberty tree, it provided cover for the rebels by making the gather-

ing look casual, not treasonous.

In 2007, a group of modern-day patriots led by former USA Today editor Ken Paulson founded the Liberty Tree Initiative to rekindle that spirit of open and constructive conversation about freedom in America. This semester, Lehigh received a \$5,000 grant from the initiative to fund a series of programs on First Amendment freedoms called "Lehigh Celebrates the First!" This year's events, which ended Monday, focused on freedom of speech, but we hope to make the program an annual event and work our way through all five freedoms.

One of the most gratifying projects was our Web site, called "Banned Books We Love," containing testimonial blurbs from almost 100 students, faculty and staff about books ranging from "Ulysses" and "The Catcher in the Rye" to "The Da Vinci Code" and Harry Potter. Contributors expressed surprise at the classic works that have been censored or challenged in this country — according to the American Library Association, almost half of the Radcliffe Publishing Course's 100 best novels of the 20th century have been challenged, usually in school districts or public libraries. Our Web site, <http://www.lehigh.edu/~infirst>, demon-

strates both the frequency of censorship attempts today and Lehigh's commitment to free expression.

The grant also enabled us to bring Paulson, now president of the Freedom Forum and the Newseum in Washington, D.C., to talk about the First Amendment with our students. He brought with him a trio of top-notch musicians, including a three-time Grammy Award winner, to conclude our celebration with "Fight the Power: The Music That Changed America," a show that used slides, film clips and live performances to tell the story of music and music censorship in the United States. From Chuck D to Janis Ian, the courage of the musicians and the power of their music gave many of us goose bumps and made us all think about music — and freedom of speech — in a new way.

Paulson also helped us reaffirm our dedication to First Amendment principles by planting our own liberty tree outside the journalism building. Editors from our campus newspaper and yearbook took turns shoveling ceremonial dirt while others planted signs around the tree declaring, "I support free expression." As we dedicated our little elm, we pledged individually to serve the First Amendment in three ways.

First, to learn more about our constitutional rights and exercise them fully, while accepting the responsibilities that come with them. Second, to hold our government accountable when it attempts to restrict rights, whether ours or others. And finally, to open our minds and really listen to points of view we may not agree with, to uphold what Justice William Brennan called "the profound national commitment to the principle that debate on public issues should be uninhibited, robust and wide-open."

According to Paulson, complacency is the biggest threat to the First Amendment. After seeing the enthusiasm with which Lehigh students embraced our events, I'm confident that the danger, while real, can be prevented. With the commitment of educators and support from programs such as the Liberty Tree Initiative, we can ensure that future generations recognize and gladly take up their duty to protect our fundamental freedoms.

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