

Steven Sepe

From: Alex G <alexandragraudins@gmail.com>
Sent: Wednesday, April 2, 2025 2:52 AM
To: House State Government and Elections Committee
Cc: Rep. Shekarchi, K Joseph; Rep. Blazejewski, Christopher R.; Rep. McEntee, Carol Hagan; Sen. Valverde, Bridget G.; seth.magaziner@mail.house.gov
Subject: Written Testimony in Support of H5726, the Freedom to Read Act

As a local comics artist and library assistant, I write in strong support of the Freedom to Read Act (H5726) This bill protects our fundamental American rights to free speech, free inquiry, and the right to form and express our own opinions, as laid out by the First Amendment and the Rhode Island constitution.

In the past three years, Rhode Island school committees have fielded challenges of nearly twenty-eight books. Did you know the Washington Post reported that 60% of school library book challenges in 2021-2022 came from eleven people? The same eleven people across the entire country! Why should so few people dictate what 1 million Rhode Islanders can and can't read? Parents have rights, just not over other people's families. Most book banning has been done under the guise of "protecting the children," but every family has a different definition of what is appropriate. Unfortunately, there are people out there who deem other people's identities as pornographic or offensive, but, removing books on topics of race and gender identity doesn't stop them from existing, it just sends a message that they are not welcome, which is antithetical to building community.

While researching data to back this bill, I learned my graphic novel memoir, *Improve: How I Discovered Improv and Conquered Social Anxiety*, my real life story of being a young adult taking improv classes in Rhode Island, had been banned somewhere in Texas. The specific reasoning is still a mystery, but it's a heartbreaking thought because I wrote it with my teenage self in mind. Back then, I didn't know how to manage my anxiety and depression, and improv taught me a lot about society and performing that translated into improvements in everyday interactions. I wanted to write down what I learned for the sake of other anxious people who aren't as lucky to have such a fun, loving community nearby. I thought folks who had this information sooner wouldn't have to suffer as long as I did. Banning my book feels like spitting in the face of anyone struggling with their mental health. It disrespects the real life Rhode Islanders portrayed in the book who helped me come into my own. It is not fair that someone else's discriminatory beliefs could deny someone their own moment of personal discovery, especially kids in the midst of finding their place in the world.

We all deserve to read and write what we want without fear of legal repercussions. The librarians who support us deserve to do their jobs without harassment or threat of criminalization. Let Rhode Island be among the states leading the charge making sure we are all protected. I ask you to vote in support of the Freedom to Read.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Alex Gaudins, Wakefield, 02879