

Steven Sepe

From: Andrea Rojas <arri753@gmail.com>
Sent: Thursday, April 3, 2025 11:21 AM
To: House State Government and Elections Committee; Rep. Shekarchi, K Joseph; Rep. Blazejewski, Christopher R.; Rep. Morales, David
Subject: Andrea Rojas, CLPVD Board Member, FOR House Bill #5726

Good evening

My name is Andrea Rojas, Board member of the Community Libraries of Providence and frequent patron of Mt Pleasant Library. I am here in support of both the Freedom to Read Act.

I had the pleasure of attending the Freedom to Read press conference hosted here at the State House. At the event they had a table full of free copies of books by local Rhode Island authors and illustrators. All the books present had either been challenged or outright banned from libraries and classrooms all around the country.

I attended the press conference with my sister, Melanie, who has intellectual and developmental disabilities. At the event, we picked up a book: *Saturday* by Oge Mora, who's a local author. Melanie is 24 years old and reads at about a First Grade reading level. She is an accomplished and enthusiastic reader in her own right, having read over 400 children's books in 2024.

This year so far, she's read 222 children's books as of today.

Melanie and I visit Mt Pleasant library 3-4 times a week. She loves to sift through all the of the children's books, picking out 4 to 5 books at a time. It's important to note that Melanie read all 447 books of her own accord - she chose what books she wanted to read, either going by the theme, illustrations, or out of curiosity. It is this enthusiasm and love for reading that we should be focused on continuing to cultivate within our young people.

One of her favorite books that she read last year was titled "Planting Stories: The Life of Storyteller Pura Belpre," by Anika Aldamuy Denise, also a local author. The book tells the story about the first Puerto Rican librarian in New York City; she was a trailblazer and a champion of bilingual storytelling. Similar to the book *Saturday*, this very same book was removed from classrooms and school libraries in a school district in Pennsylvania.

What this tells me is that those who would have books like *Saturday* or *Planting Stories* restricted are effectively saying that these stories have no value, that these stories don't deserve to be told.

Here in Rhode Island we embrace diversity, and we understand the importance of uplifting all stories and lived experiences. And we have the power to codify this into law. We could prevent blanket restrictions like this from taking place by passing this bill. And this bill still allows for people to question and present a formal complaint against a book, but it puts in place formal procedures to prevent a book from being brazenly restricted for just any reason.

I ask you all to please support both the Freedom to Read Act here in our state. Thank you.