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Sent: Tuesday, April 1, 2025 2:40 PM
To: House State Government and Elections Committee; Rep. Shekarchi, K Joseph; Rep. Blazejewski, Christopher R.; seth.magaziner@mail.house.gov; davidmoraleshd7@gmail.com
Subject: Testimony for the Freedom to Read Act S0238

Hello, my name is Cathy G. Johnson. I am a Rhode Island resident and I am writing in favor of the passing of Freedom to Read Act S0238.

I am the author of *The Breakaways*, a middle school graphic novel. It is about a school soccer team and building friendships. My book was the 2019 winner of the local Rhode Island Dorris Award for Children's Book of the Year. Publishers Weekly lauded it, saying the graphic novel "will resonate with readers who are figuring out who they are and where they belong."

The book was doing well. In 2021, imagine my surprise when I started getting contacted by reporters for CNN, ABC, NBC, the Associated Press, Fox News, and many more. It started in Texas, but I've been contacted by people in Missouri, Oklahoma, and Florida. The book was being banned. Why?

When I first moved to Rhode Island in my early 20's I was teaching in Pawtucket elementary schools. These schools were filled with amazing children, all who had diverse backgrounds and diverse interests. I wanted to make a book for my students. I wanted to make a book where the children specifically of Rhode Island could see themselves and read about themselves.

According to the School Library Journal, in 2018, the year before my book came out, only 10% of children's books had Black characters. 5% had Latino. At the time, 29% of Pawtucket students were Black, and 26% were Latino. It wasn't fair. *The Breakaways* has 15 characters in it, there are a lot of players on a school soccer team! So, I could include a lot of diverse life experiences.

I was able to include other diversities, such as socio-economic status, body size, hair type, and gender expression. Yes, one of the students on the soccer team is Sammy, who, part way through the book, comes out as transgender. He's not a big part of the book. Sammy is a pretty minor character. The book is not a transgender story at all. It's a story about the lives of children, and the many different identities of children who exist in this world. But because of Sammy in my book, the book gets challenged and banned.

I say all this to tell you that this book is Rhode Island. I made this book for Rhode Island children. I live in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood. Me and David Morales go to the same library.

And it's at that library in 2019, when *The Breakaways* came out, where I taught a comic book drawing class. In my comic book classes I show children how to express themselves. Most of the time we're expressing ourselves with funny pictures, goofy monsters and silly drawing games. I've taught a similar class to much acclaim throughout Rhode Island. Woonsocket, Smithfield, Cumberland, North Kingstown, I could keep going. In these library classes I teach children to express who they are with creativity. In these classes magic happens. Children should always be able to express themselves. They should feel special and protected and they should feel safe. Books should reflect the real lives of children.

Thank you for supporting the Freedom to Read Rhode Island legislation, supporting the growth of children to love themselves, however they identify. Books give children self-worth.

The 2021 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health states that 70 percent of LGBTQ youth described their mental health as "poor." 42 percent of LGBTQ youth seriously considered attempting suicide. The survey says strategies to improve mental health and prevent self-harming behavior and suicide include: providing safe and supportive environments, and enacting legislation to protect the safety of LGBTQ youth.

I have been the victim of harassment from these book bans. I have received threats. But to me I am not the real victim here. It's the readers, the children. You have the power to protect children's ability to see themselves, feel heard, and be valued. Please do.