

Dear Legislators,

My name is Daphnee Rentfrow, I am a resident of East Greenwich, and I am writing to urge you to support the Freedom to Read Act in Rhode Island (H5726). In such a volatile and trying era in our democracy's history, it is imperative that our state safeguard the freedom to read. Book bans, soft bans, censorship, attacks on libraries and librarians, and threats of litigation around these topics are rising in our country and in our state. The threat to our rights to read and access a wide range of texts for ourselves and our children is a clear and present danger to our state and our democracy. This bill protects our fundamental American rights to free speech, free inquiry, and the right to form and express our opinions as laid out by the First Amendment and the Rhode Island Constitution. Protect our free access to ideas and literary art, shield our libraries, librarians, artists, writers, and schools from frivolous attacks by ill-intentioned special interest groups, and uphold the right to free expression. Please **support** H5726.

Why have I taken the time to write this testimony? Why is **this** the first time in my voting life that I have taken this step and encouraged others to do the same? It is because books and libraries save lives. Seeing yourself in a book connects you to others and makes you and your lived experiences real to yourself and others. You are no longer alone when you see yourself in a book. Learning different perspectives of history teaches us that people experience life and world events in different ways. Reading makes us all better thinkers, better consumers of information, better citizens. Libraries have been a part of my life since my earliest childhood, which was spent moving from one military base to another as my father served in the US Air Force for 30 years. Moving from country to country and from school to school, one of the only constants was that there would always be a library on base. I could go there to read and get to know new children even before the school year began, as there were always children in the library. Those books that I read shaped the person I would become. Reading built a sense of empathy and compassion in me that is very hard to develop without imagining yourself in the shoes of others. Living in different countries, learning to exist in different cultures and languages, and meeting all the different people that comprise the United States military made it that much more important for me to develop a sense of the different experiences of people throughout the world and the ties that connect us to each other. Different stories help different people see themselves and to see others. Nonfiction helps us know our world and our histories in a multitude of ways. Books are not dangerous. History is not dangerous. Knowledge is not dangerous. Anyone who acts like these things are to be banned and feared are operating from self-serving, ill-educated, or self-centered reasons. Attacks on libraries and librarians are especially cruel and disruptive, as they turn books, the people who care for them, and the spaces where they exist into targets for vitriol and slanderous accusations.

As a parent, I have made sure that my children are familiar with libraries and understand the value of having free and open access to books and the knowledge they contain. My husband and I have made choices along the way with our three very different children, weighing in on which books we thought they were prepared to read at different ages and different levels of maturity. Certainly there were books that we parents decided might not be appropriate for them, at a particular age, for various reasons, and we discussed those reasons with our children. These decisions were never the same for each child at each age because they are different

children with different sensibilities and personalities and interests. We didn't limit one child just because we decided another was not ready for a particular book. Never once did it occur to us to make these books unavailable to any other family or to protest their presence on library shelves or to attack their creators.

My love for libraries, and my admiration of librarians and their mission, has only grown and deepened over the decades. But when it comes down to it, you don't need my story to convince you--the most important reason to support the Freedom to Read Act is to uphold the values of the constitution. **Free people read freely.** Any attempt to circumscribe what people can read is a threat to our democracy. Any attack on librarians and other custodians of knowledge is a cowardly attack on democratic ideals. It is no accident that most government overthrows and descends into authoritarianism begin with the banning and burning of books, and the persecution of their creators and their guardians. Rhode Island's roots are firmly planted on the side of freedom and individual rights--we must continue that legacy and protect the **right**, and the **freedom**, to read.

Thank you,
Daphnee Rentfrow, PhD, MLIS