

Bluegrass Silence: Kentucky Youth Needs a Voice

Truth: the foundation of both solid journalism and democracy. Without uncensored, unrestricted truth, members of a society can and will not make fully educated decisions regarding their lives and the wellbeing of their country. New Voices, a legislative movement initiated and pushed through by students, empowers young journalists to speak their whole truth, not simply the portion of the truth their administration is comfortable with. Their ultimate goal is for every high school and college student publication staff in all 50 states to be free from any and all restrictions; a nation in which youth can practice their First Amendment rights in every environment. Advocates of New Voices believe that not passing this legislation throughout the entire US would be detrimental to the democratic nature of the country, saying on their website, "In a society dependent on journalists and the public keeping the government in check, we cannot afford to have curiosity and confidence bred out of our students. We cannot afford to stifle today's new voices because they are tomorrow's media leaders and citizens." The absence of truth breeds ignorance within communities, and this ignorance prevents individuals from making wise decisions for the betterment of their world.

Throughout the nation, state legislatures have been making progress in this pursuit of journalistic freedom. Over half have made strides by starting a New Voices campaign, six of these which have passed legislation protecting high school publications from administrative censorship, and eight which have passed legislation protecting both high school and college publications, and fifteen which are currently working to get legislation passed. Lindsay Safe, a journalism advisor from California, one of the states which now has complete journalistic freedom, said, "[Our staff] can publish whatever they want. But because our community is so conservative a lot of times they will think twice about what they will choose to publish. They make that choice on their own." Cassie Busheim, a journalism student from Missouri, another state that is making strides towards complete newswriting liberty, said, "Our publication is pretty liberal in our ideas and what we are willing to put in our paper. But we try not to be controversial because the school is very bipartisan." States who support New Voices echo the same sentiment; students, not administration, need to possess the choice whether or not to publish a story. Otherwise, the real stories will never be told.

However, our home state of Kentucky is one of the 21 states who has not shown any support towards New Voice legislation. In fact, when journalists try to uncover the truth, they are often hit with strong backlash. A recent example of this is the case of The Kentucky Kernel, the student publication at the University of Kentucky. A professor who worked within the institution was accused of sexual misconduct, and when documents concerning the incident were leaked to The Kentucky Kernel, they attempted to publish a story about the major event. However, the university responded, not with acceptance of the truth, however ugly it might have been, but with an ongoing lawsuit. This case serves as a representation of the entire Bluegrass. The conservative nature of the commonwealth has inhibited acceptance of change in the past, notably the unwillingness to integrate women into state and local governments, and this is simply the same story with different characters. While the rest of the country makes strides to ensure their citizens are aware and educated, Kentucky falls behind.

The First Amendment prohibits "abridging the freedom of speech." But does this freedom extend to the whole truth, or only the portion of the truth that is considered appropriate? Even at Abilene Christian University, an institution which holds very strong religious values, journalistic freedom is valued.

Cheryl Bacon, a representative from the school, said, "We have a long standing policy that excellent journalism and truthfulness belongs [here]. We honor truth here in all of its forms."

Perhaps Kentucky can learn from educational institutions such as these; the truth of the Bluegrass has been silenced long enough.

IF you had full legal protection to write about whatever you wanted, what would you write about?

