



# AFCON



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Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska

December 20, 1997

## AFCON OFFICERS

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Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble; and to petition the government for a redress of

## Book Burning . . . . Students Cheated out of Knowledge by Community Fear

The flesh of a naked man flashes across the screen, hazed over by the static created as an English teacher fast forwards through the scene. What movies are being viewed by freshmen in the public school? "Romeo and Juliet," the Zeffereilli version, of course.

Students in many classrooms have never watched this scene. In these classrooms, the voices of such revolutionaries as Maya Angelou, John Steinbeck, J.D. Salinger, Mark Twain and William Shakespeare are not heard. The words of these literary greats are deleted from libraries and classrooms because parents, school board members and community leaders fear the influence those words might have on our youth.

The rape of young Maya in "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" has catapulted the novel to the top of most banned books of 1995-96. Protecting students from the horror encountered by this young child also excludes them from the learning and growing process that ensues. With the willful silencing of her voice, the young heroine broadcasts her personal power.

The anger-filled speeches of Holden Caulfield are also censored material. The reason: The language used by Caulfield has been deemed unacceptable

in many high schools. The reality is that students are surrounded by such language everyday, on television, at schools and often in their homes.

At the end of Salinger's "A Catcher in the Rye," the reader becomes so immune to the words that one barely hears them anymore.

The banning of books and plays from the public schools is not a recent phenomenon. Ever since the publication of the written word, some people have tried to suppress it. The rationales vary among different groups, but the underlying motive is ignorance. People tend to fear what they do not know. They fear their children may be exposed to what they do not understand.

Historically, three major reasons for banning material from public schools have existed: race, sex and violence.

The use of racial slang in works such as "Huckleberry Finn" more often results in its removal from assigned reading lists than in having useful and educational discussions about student reactions to the novel. The denial of this work prevents students from understanding the struggles that many

people, especially minorities faced in the days of Mark Twain. The language presented forces a reader to confront what prejudices existed in that period of American history.

"Forever" by Judy Blume has been lifted from shelves after being characterized as a sexual how-to book for young people. The assumption is that the only exposure that students will have to sex will come from a book in the school library. This pretense allows communities to make a scapegoat out of literature and forget about the influences of television, advertising and peer groups.

The inhumanity characterized in "Slaughterhouse Five" has made it a perennial favorite of the top banned books list. The amazing literary techniques exhibited in Vonnegut's tale are discarded in place of softer, less truthful texts that will not expose our students to the thought-provoking realities exposed by Vonnegut.

In the admirable attempt to shelter children from the harsh realities they will face while growing into adulthood, society has in turn left them to develop without the benefit of the expertise of those who have gone before.

The banning of books also shortchanges youth by not giving them quality material with which to expand their outlooks. The creation of barriers has never

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## A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

The AFCON Executive Board has taken several steps in the last few months that should involve it more deeply and more publicly in issues that affect academic freedom.

First, Jeffrey Lofthus will begin his statewide survey of censorship in Nebraska schools in January. This project should produce hard data on the extent and nature of censorship activities. AFCON and its constituent organizations can then use that information for alerting the public to the problem and formulating policies to correct it.

Another major development is the appointment of a policy coordinator. David Moshman of the UNL educational psychology department and a former

AFCON president suggested the creation of this position, and he is AFCON's first coordinator. Because many of the issues AFCON deals with are highly technical ones in which academic freedom issues are not always well defined, the Board decided that a coordinator would help us understand those issues and develop appropriate responses.

The first issue facing the policy coordinator is a State Board of Education policy proposal to require the teaching of phonics in elementary schools. Moshman and Bob Haller prepared a draft policy statement on this issue, and that statement will be considered at the AFCON Board meeting December 13.

The Board purchased from Lincoln cartoonist Paul Fell a design for a T-shirt. Once the

shirts have been ordered they will be sold at appropriate conferences. A developing issue that warrants attention is an instance of censorship at Bellevue West High School. According to the Omaha World-Herald, the principal pulled two pages from the student newspaper because he objected to a story about an alternative religion (a form of witchcraft) and a story about the life of a gay student. The journalism students who write and edit the paper are appealing the principal's decision to the central administration.

These and other initiatives constitute a substantial amount of work for the Board. We appreciate and need participation and advice of all our constituent members to we can address these controversial and important issues effectively.

## MINUTES of the AFCON Board of Directors

September 12, 1997—John Bender, President, outlined AFCON's missions: SURVEILLANCE of activities in schools, colleges, and libraries as they pertain to intellectual freedom; DISSEMINATION of information about challenges to intellectual freedom; COMMUNITY BUILDING to support organizations and individuals on intellectual freedom issues; and RESPONSE to offer assistance to those under attack and/or mediation in conflicts over intellectual freedom, and to lobby for legislation.

Members affirmed that

AFCON must be proactive, rather than reactive.

Discussion moved to the Nebraska State Board of Education. Members discussed ways in which AFCON might provide input on educational issues facing the Board. AFCON suggested Board of Education meetings be taped and shown on public access television channels or through community libraries.

Members will check the the possibility of having an Internet Web Site/Home Page for AFCON.

Discussions on projects continued: the selling of T-shirts, the

survey of censorship, and support of the Freedom of Expression bill now in the Unicameral.

November 8, 1997—Dr. Jeff Lofthus, a Norfolk public school principal, presented revised plans to document educational materials which have been censored or challenged in public school classrooms, libraries, and extracurricular activities.

Members suggested they present intellectual freedom sessions at conferences held by organizations like NELAC, and the Nebraska Press

## Dr. Mel Krutz Recognized Nationally

Dr. Mel Krutz, of Seward, nominated by the Nebraska Language Arts Council (NELAC,) was selected by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) for the Support the Learning and Teaching of English (SLATE) National Intellectual Freedom Award, at the NCTE Convention in Detroit, Michigan, on November 23.

SLATE is an NCTE standing committee on social and political concerns which affect teachers and the teaching of English and language arts at the local, state, and national levels and serves as NCTE's intellectual freedom network. This was the inaugural year of its Intellectual Freedom Awards.

Dr. Krutz was recognized by NCTE as "More than an advocate for intellectual freedom in Nebraska, as also a nationally recognized authority."

In Nebraska, Mel has served as chair of NELAC's Advocates for Intellectual Freedom, as Nebraska SLATE chair, as founding president and continued board member of the Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska (AFCON) since its founding in 1988, and as a speaker and writer on censorship issues.

At the national level, she has been a speaker at NCTE conventions, has served

**Book Burning. .Students cheated (cont. from p.**

been an effective learning tool and will not become one anytime in the near future. To exclude literature from the education of youth allows them to be increasingly vulnerable to the propaganda of the powerful.

The better approach would be to discuss with those students what it is that they are reading and why. If allowed to contemplate the meaning of the sexual and racial relationships in "Their Eyes were Watching God," teen-agers may come to realizations that will surprise and impress their parents and teachers. And having read this material, the students will become better-educated adults—something for which we all should aim.

(By Alexia Scott, reprinted with

permission from the Daily Nebraskan—the student newspaper of UN-L)

**Mel Krutz** (Cont. from p 2)

against Censorship for six years, and was Chair Pro Tem in 1991. She also served on NCTE's Task Force on Dealing with Censorship of Nonprint Materials in 1992 and 1993, and has works published in several books and periodicals.

Now retired, Dr. Krutz has been a professor of Education and of English at Hastings College, Concordia College, and Central Community College where she received the 1995 Excellence of Teaching

**THE ISTOOK AMENDMENT:**

A "Religious Liberties" proposed constitutional amendment introduced in November 1995 by Rep. Ernest Istook (R-OK.)

Original working: "Nothing in this Constitution shall prohibit acknowledgments of the religious heritage, beliefs, or traditions of the people, or prohibit student-sponsored prayer in public schools. Neither the United States nor any State shall compose any official prayer or compel joining in prayer or discriminate against religious expression or belief."

In October 1997, the House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution approved this substitute, 8-4: "To secure the people's right to acknowledge God according to the dictates of conscience, neither the United States nor any State shall establish any official religion, but the people's right to pray and to recognize their religious beliefs, heritage, or traditions on public property, including schools, shall not be infringed. Neither the United States . Neither the United States nor any State shall require any person to join in prayer or other religious activity, prescribe school prayers, discriminate against religion or deny access to a benefit on account of religion."

**INTERNET ONLINE SUMMIT: FOCUS ON CHILDREN**

Last summer the U.S. Supreme Court rejected the Communications Decency Act (a federal attempt to criminalize the distribution of indecent material over the Internet where kids could see it.) Since then there have been attempts to pass similar "decency acts" in several state legislatures, in city councils, and in library and school boards. Generally such proposals would require or recommend that public libraries (apparently the foci of current activity) install filtering software on their computers to block Internet access which can be harmful to minors.

Those who favor legislation or policies that require filtering devices on publicly accessible computers are concerned that minors can easily access a wide variety of Internet material which they feel is sexually explicit, pornographic, and violent. Several religious and family value organizations support this view.

Those who oppose government legislation are concerned that current blocking software often bars material protected by the First Amendment, thus filtering free speech. Filtering software excludes sites that deal with important social topics: homosexuality, women's issues, human rights, prisons, rape, sexual or spousal abuse, drugs, etc. They believe that parents not government or businesses or ideological extremists should be responsible for what their children see on the Internet. Too, such legislation may make librarians liable if a minor manages to get past blocking software. A number of civil liberty organizations and library associations support this view.

December 1-3, the **INTERNET ONLINE SUMMIT**, a coalition of high-tech companies and public policy groups, met in Washington, D.C., to discuss how to make cyberspace safe for children without new government regulations. Faced with pressures from the Clinton Administration, new pending legislation in Congress and state legislatures and growing concerns of parents, the conference participants hope to find several solutions to ease public fears.

Expected outcomes are campaigns to educate parents and initiatives to work with law enforcement to prosecute violators of existing laws prohibiting pornography. Some participants are planing to publish "white lists" of recommended sites for children. Yahoo! Inc. and WebTV are promoting a Web site (smartparent.com) to help parents educate themselves about the dangerous side of the Net. American On Line announced "AOL Neighborhood Watch," an icon directly linking members to safe and secure areas. Disney has D-Guide that will point families to kid-appropriate Web sites and a public-education program to teach families about online safety. Supporting a "zero tolerance" policy toward child pornography, Vice President Al Gore said the government would issue a parents' guide to the Internet and finance an emergency hotline where parents could report suspicious or illegal Internet activity. Gore said "blocking a child's view of the Internet was not censoring-that's called parenting." (C-Net/News.Com, People For the American Way, Omaha World-Herald, Yahoo News contributed to this article)

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## ACADEMIC FREEDOM COALITION OF NEBRASKA

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### **BOOKS BANNED OR CHALLENGED IN THE '90's . . .**

Manet (Edouard)-Abrams; I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings-Angelou; The Handmaid's Tale-Atwood; Clan of the Cave Bear-Auel; Witches, Pumpkins, and Grinning Ghosts: The Story of the Halloween Symbols-Barth; On My Honor-Bauer; Forever, The Figure in the Shadows-Bellairs; Impressions-Edited by Booth et al; Blubber, Then Again Maybe I Won't-Blum; Tarzan of the Apes-Burroughs; Curses, Hexes, and Spells-Cohen; My Brother Sam is Dead-Collier and Collier; The Chocolate War-Cormier; The Witches, Revolting Rhymes, James and the Giant Peach-Dahl; The Graphic Work of M.C. Escher-Escher; Jambo Means Hello: The Swahili Alphabet-Feelings; Harriet the Spy-Fitzhugh; The Old Gringo-Fuentes; Annie on My Mind-Garden; Grendel-Gardner; My House-Giovanni; Lord of the Flies-Golding; The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm; Snow Falling on Cedars-Guterson; Native Son-Harper; It's Perfectly Normal-Harris; Voodoo and Hoodoo-Haskins; Brave New World-Huxley; One Hundred Questions and Answers about AIDS-Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm; Carrie, Christine, Cujo-King; A Separate Peace-Knowles; Night Chills-Koontz; A Wrinkle in Time- L'Engle; To Kill a Mocking Bird-Lee; The Way Things Ought to Be-Limbaugh; One Fat Summer-Lipsyte; One Hundred Years of Solitude-Marquez; The New Teenage Body Book-McCoy and Wibbelsman; Halloween ABC-Merriam; The Sound of Waves-Mishima; Beloved-Morrison; I Have to Go-Munsch; Fallen Angels-Myers; Earthshine-Nelson; Heather Has Two Mommies-Newman; The Learning Tree-Parks; Bridge to Terabithia, The Great Gilly Hopkins-Paterson; A Day No Pigs Would Die-Peck; Understanding Sexual Identity-Rench; How to Eat Fried Worms-Rockwell; The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies-Russo; Catcher in the Rye-Salinger; Scary Stories in the Dark, More Scary Stories in the Dark, Scary Stories 3: More Tales to Chill Your Bones-Schwartz; In the Night Kitchen-Sendak; A Light in the Attic-Silverstein; The Headless Cupid, The Witches of Worm-Snyder; Chato's Kitchen-Soto; Grapes of Wrath, Of Mice and Men-Steinbeck; Private Parts-Stern; Goosebumps Series-Stine; The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer-Twain; Tommy Stands Alone-Velasquez; Live from Golgotha-Vidal; Slaughterhouse-Five-Vonnegut; The Color Purple-Walker; Little House in the Big Woods-Wilder; Daddy's Roommate-Willhoite; Black Boy-Wright; The Autobiography of Malcom X-X and Haley; The Pigman-Zindel; The Bible; The Life and Works of Renoir; Little Red Riding Hood.The Life and Works of Renoir; Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary and the American Heritage Dictionary. (Sources: ACLU, Internet Search "Banned Books")