
BENJAMIN M. SHAPIRO

Phone: +1 (215) 208-8603

Email: BenShapiro2006@gmail.com

Web: BenShapiroMedia.com

LinkedIn: linkedin.com/in/ben-shapiro

March 10, 2024

RE: Student Journalist of the Year Personal Narrative

You know the saying, "If I had a nickel for every time I had to fight to maintain my freedom of speech..." Or something like that.

I spent the past four years of my life dedicated to covering the news — through the written word, photographs and videos. From in-depth investigations into my school district's budget discrepancies to photo essays covering President Joe Biden's trips to my suburban Philadelphia home, every story was important. And every story was worth telling.

My principal, however, did not always agree.

As a freshman with no real journalism experience save for the few articles I wrote for the middle school "paper," I quickly discovered my passion for storytelling. I wanted to learn information that no one else knew. And then I wanted to make sure everyone knew it.

In spring 2021, I began looking into Pennsylvania and my school district's sexual education policies. Rather, the lack thereof. Not only did my school not offer a single course that taught safe sex practices, but state requirements indicated that, even if such a course existed, there was no requirement for the information taught to be medically accurate. So I began reporting.

Almost immediately, I faced backlash from my principal. I found it increasingly difficult to find teachers who were willing to go on the record and landed myself between a rock and a hard place — my principal was attempting to hinder my reporting and stop me from publishing. She called me into her office and asked, "Why do you want to cover something that makes us look weak?" Overcome with fear but trying my hardest not to show it, I replied, "Because it's the truth."

The next year, I covered two separate lawsuits that parents filed against the school district, one opposing the district's mask mandate and one arguing a First Amendment violation in accessing educational materials the parent claimed to be "Critical Race Theory." Once again, I found myself face-to-face with my principal. This time, I was a year older, a year stronger and a year wiser. "Why would you expose a student's family like that on the front page of the newspaper?"

"Because it's the truth. And because I have the First Amendment right to publish the news."

But then came the Senior Map. And I learned that I was only so strong. I found that effective leadership requires understanding competing viewpoints and balancing them to achieve a fair result — even if it is not your preferred outcome.

The first element is easy: understanding others' points of view is basic empathy. The second, reaching a fair result, is more difficult. It took navigating a face-off between the clear law and less clear morality of student journalism for me to learn that even the best leaders don't always see their preferred result.

For more than six decades, my high school's student newspaper, The Spoke, has chronicled the post-high school plans of the school's graduating class and published

them on a map of the United States. In May 2023, as I stepped into my role as The Spoke's Editor-in-Chief, I started collecting the information needed to publish the "Senior Destinations Map." My predecessors — many of whom boast Student Journalist of the Year titles — had been doing this without incident for years, so little did I anticipate the controversy that would arise.

Just as I began news gathering, my principal called me to her office and told me that The Spoke could no longer publish the map, going as far as threatening the employment of the paper's faculty advisers if we were to do so. Even though the seniors voluntarily gave information about their post-high school plans, my principal expressed concerns that publicizing the information was invasive and would cause students emotional distress.

Her concerns were understandable. But they were only a piece of the puzzle. I consulted with several student press and First Amendment advocacy organizations — the Student Press Law Center, the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, the Pennsylvania School Press Association and the Journalism Education Association — which explained that, as a purely legal matter, my principal had crossed the line by attempting to control non-disruptive content of a student publication. The organizations sent a letter to my principal explaining why her threats to censor The Spoke violated the law.

Spoke alumni echoed these sentiments. Many, now professional journalists and lawyers, advised me not to give in on general principle. They fought to maintain their First Amendment rights in their day and wanted me to do the same — a cause for which I have been fighting for years through the New Voices movement. I have been lobbying state legislators to codify legal protections for student journalists and spoke in support of such legislation at a press conference in Pennsylvania's capitol building.

Public opinion, however, was mixed. In response to the publication of the First Amendment advocacy organizations' letter, some saluted my fight and offered support. Others told me that I was insensitive to my fellow students.

And then there were the risks to The Spoke's faculty advisers. They wanted to protect my First Amendment rights and academic integrity without jeopardizing their jobs. I also had to consider the opinions of The Spoke's editorial board. While I, as Editor-in-Chief, technically had the final say, proceeding without input is no way to build a properly-functioning team. On top of all of this were risks to me personally. I was, after all, in a dispute with the person who controlled my secondary education.

Faced with legal pressure, my principal eventually conceded. She told me that she would not prohibit The Spoke from publishing the map, but hoped I would respect her concerns. And I did. I put the decision to a vote of the editorial board: do we publish the map as we historically have, modify it or get rid of it? By the narrowest of margins, the majority decided to publish the map without individual students' names, a result that balanced The Spoke's right to decide what it publishes with the concerns of our principal.

While I did not vote within the majority, I knew it was my duty as a leader to support the result. Leadership is not always about achieving one's preferred outcome, but about finding a fair and balanced resolution. My version of leadership lies not in unwavering adherence to personal preferences, but in the ability to harmonize opposing voices.

Sincerely,
Ben Shapiro

