

Testimony by Valley City-Barnes County Public Library Board Vice President Allen D. Blume in re: House Bill 1205.

Mr. Chairman, Members of the House Judiciary Committee:

On Thursday, January 12th, in my capacity as a member of the Valley City-Barnes County Public Library Board I voted to retain the Young Adult Graphic Novel “Let’s Talk About It: The Teen’s Guide to Sex, Relationships, and Being a Human” where it is in the Young Adult section of our library collection, following our deliberations on recent requests from the community to reconsider the library’s addition of the book to our collection. I did so after receiving and reviewing public comments on the work, most recently during our public hearing on January 5th; but also, after having read thoughtful commentary provided by our library’s patrons and taxpayers. To say that we held a wide range of opinions on the work is an understatement, and my point of view did not prevail; but I believe the issue that evening was about something far more significant than a mostly under-utilized, illustrated sexual health reference book.

That decision and this measure now before you in the form of HB 1205 are examples of how our communities will respond to well-financed dark money assaults on the First Amendment of the US Constitution.

The Valley City attack on "Let's Talk About It..." led by a newcomer editor of our hometown paper - who has since departed North Dakota for other opportunities in Texas - was fully supported by his publisher. The attack on the book was not specific to Valley City but also occurred in Dickinson and is part of a far broader pattern by domestic arch-conservative and evangelical Christian interests to undermine our Constitution and Bill of Rights; rights that are seen by them and their deep pocket financiers as impediments to rank profitability, narrow theocratic rule, and historically stultified cultural values.

Ladies and gentlemen we are living in a time that is tumultuous, threatening, and dangerous, where our once infinite resources and unfenced horizons have shrunk about us like concertina wire; where our pied a Terre – our "foot of ground" – is tested by historical generations of human beings who claim agency and assert a vastly different worldview than those of this nation's founders two-hundred forty and more years ago; and where "bleeding edge" technologies transform our knowledge of reality at speeds beyond the mere blink of our eyes – and this is all happening while our planet hovers on the edge of having eight billion (8,000,000,000!) hungry – and angry - mouths insisting that they be fed, that they be heard.

In such cacophony it is supremely difficult to discern a rational way forward as individuals, but more particularly so as cohesive and supportive communities. Our lifeboat is small and overcrowded.

So, it is not unusual or surprising that communities of interests want to take strong steps to preserve themselves and their way of life by throwing up walls, and imposing top down, authoritarian measures that assert dominion over others who may not be like them. We can see this through our news feeds, internet blogs and chatrooms, conversations with loved ones and trusted others, and the drumbeats of war and virtually lethal competitive commerce that feeds those billions of appetites. Russia's illegal attempt to annex Ukraine, the recurrent agony of the displaced Rohingya and Kurds and poor LatinX's mobbing our southern border, the near extinction level events of California forest fires and atmospheric rivers of catastrophic destruction, murderous assaults by individuals and allied "gangs" on people of color or alternative sexual identity, and here in North Dakota our own virtually constant struggle with drought, winds, and still bitterly cold winters are made just that much more difficult with the incursions of newcomers, outsiders with "queer" ways, and social behaviors that shock our staid values. Under such assaults it almost seems reasonable to claim a moral high ground and hand down judgments about that which is "God-given" and "rightfully ours." Almost...

The United States of America is a complex and troubled place, founded on ancient ideals that have been imperfectly implemented by every generation since its beginning, yet it has been able to cobble together nominal solutions that have brought us to this place of amazing opportunity and life-threatening peril. Generationally we have responded to the challenges of building AND rebuilding our nation, and today is no different than it ever

was, and that's our challenge – to keep ourselves alert, thoughtful, and engaged with the winds of change that are blowing over us – and we can only do that as a collectively engaged people willing to meet and confer, to remain open to the onrushing future, and the people who are borne to us on those winds of change.

“Let's Talk About It...” is, for this old man, a tiresome and raucous book. It irritates my eyes with its crude art-work and glib invitation to wander in internet fields of “wine and roses.” But then I am well into my seventh decade and there is nothing between those covers that I have not seen or discovered, sometimes through misadventure, but particularly in libraries, and most notably where it began for me as a boy a full seven decades before.

During our hearing last week, I was impressed by two young, high school-aged men who spoke, particularly for their candor, but also for their quite mature understanding of what it means to be a new citizen of this world. They already know more about the intricacies of tomorrow than this “Boomer” can begin to conceive, and through their own words, they signal a willingness to engage with the future to shape it to theirs and humankind's wills. They give me hope, but they also leave me with the dead certain assurance that trying to withhold, censor, or create some artificial “age-specific/age appropriate” knowledge will only mean they will find it anyway and laugh at our feeble attempts to conceal it. And in that I

LEGISLATIVE TESTIMONY BY ALLEN D. BLUME
IN RE: ND Legislative Assembly House Bill No. 1205
An Act Prohibiting Public Libraries from Maintaining Sexually Explicit Books
January 17, 2023
(703) 399-4884
adb8917@earthlink.net

say to them and every person who will challenge the gatekeepers, “Go for it!”

I began this statement by citing what I believe to be an organized assault on our First Amendment rights by forces inimical to the free flow of knowledge and the growth and development of all human potential. I will close be reasserting that belief. Our shared global history of burned books, shattered glass, cattle cars, reservations and concentration camps, race-based massacres, crematoria, and genocide begins, first, with an assault on knowledge. One of our presenters last week captured that threat with her words: “A public library must never serve as a moral militia or the police. It is not the responsibility of any library - or state legislature - to censor or abridge anyone’s access to books, periodicals, recordings, movies, works of art, or other collections of human creativity for the purpose of upholding some ambiguous moral standard.” I agree with her wholeheartedly.

House Bill No. 1205 is a full-frontal assault on our Constitution and much cherished Bill of Rights. It must never become the law of our land.

--