



**“Reading Dangerously” Celebrates 50 Years of Freedom to Read  
Interview with Deborah Caldwell-Stone**

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**KENNEALLY:** In 1969 the American Library Association organized the Freedom to Read Foundation as a legal defense fund fighting censorship and other challenges to free speech. That same year 250,000 protestors marched in Washington against the Vietnam war. The Woodstock festival attracted 500,000 spectators, and the trial began of the Chicago Seven, radical activists who were accused of inciting riots at the 1968 Democratic National Convention.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center’s podcast series, I’m Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book.

At the annual ALA conference now underway in Washington, DC, the Freedom to Read Foundation is marking a half century of court battles to protect the rights of American citizens to free access to controversial books and other media in schools and public libraries. A commemorative book, *Reading Dangerously*, will be launched, too.

Since 1969, as technology and society changed, so have the foundation’s concerns. The US is a country more diverse than ever, and we all live today in an age of largely unfettered digital access to books, movies, and much more. Freedom to read in 2019 now means the freedom to read in privacy, away from prying digital surveillance tools. Freedom to read in 2019 also means librarians and school administrators face new challenges when choosing materials and maintaining collections.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone is the Interim Director of the Freedom to Read Foundation in the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom. She is an attorney and former appellate litigator who works closely with librarians, teachers, and library trustees on a wide range of intellectual freedom issues including book and resource censorship, Internet filtering, and library users’ privacy and confidentiality. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Deborah.

**CALDWELL-STONE:** Thank you, Chris. Thank you for inviting me to be here today.



**KENNEALLY:** The occasion that you are marking to support the occasion of the first half century of the Freedom to Read Foundation is an important one to anyone involved in media, and you, the ALA, have certainly made a great contribution in protecting everyone's freedom of speech and expression. I want to try to review some of the high points of that. But I'm especially interested in the way the work that you do there has evolved over time because one's notion of freedom to read in 1969 has changed, or was very different than what we know it as today. Talk about that change.

**CALDWELL-STONE:** Absolutely. When the foundation was created 50 years ago our focus was very much on thinking how we could provide legal defense to libraries and librarians who were resisting censorship, and also to address the very precedents in the law that would support censorship of materials. I think about what call, in shorthand, the Pico decision, Board of Education of Island Trees, New York versus Steven Pico, which was the very first Supreme Court decision that held that you had a First Amendment right to read and view the contents of a publicly funded library. In that context it was a school library, but it was an important milestone, and it's one that the foundation helped to bring about by supporting the litigant, Steven Pico, who was suing for his right to read in his high school library, through the use of amicus briefs. So our focus was on legal defense and litigation, and it still is.

A large part of our work still involves addressing censorship in the courts, but since then, with the challenges that we faced and our understanding of what's going, we've evolved also into a foundation that engages in civic education, professional education on First Amendment, and access to information issues. The issues that we address in the court have evolved from simple book censorship to Internet use, defending the right to freely access and view materials on the Internet. We have a deep concern for protecting the privacy and confidentiality of library users. In recent years we have delved into issues like discrimination, when the censorship arises out of discriminatory intent, as it did in Tucson, Arizona, when they closed down a high school's Mexican-American studies program.

**KENNEALLY:** It's really interesting because the evolution that's occurred in the last 50 years is a technological – well, it's a technological revolution, but the country has changed so dramatically in its social makeup. We are, as I mentioned in the introduction, a more diverse country than ever, and this raises important challenges to access to a diverse collection of books, a diverse collection of media.



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**CALDWELL-STONE:** Absolutely. Our goal is to ensure, based on our support of the presence of public libraries and our country and our communities, that everyone should find themselves reflected in the collection and the offerings of a public library. This means that you find yourself defending the materials provided as curriculum materials to high school students in a Mexican-American studies program. It means defending the ability of a library to present Drag Queen Story Time without being harassed or censored by public officials. It means doing your utmost to make sure that the public library's truly open and available to everyone without regard to their race, gender identity, their background, their views. This is really a good part of the work of the foundation, supporting both court decisions or litigation that vindicates these rights, as well as providing education that places knowledge and tools in the hands of librarians so that they, too, can defend the right to freely read in the library.

**KENNEALLY:** We've been talking about the way that the world has changed – the technology revolution, the social evolution – but libraries have been part of that change, as well. Does this change the way that librarians interact with the Freedom to Read Foundation? Today libraries are so much more than just collections of books, they are resource centers, they are meeting places, as well.

**CALDWELL-STONE:** Absolutely. This does mean that the foundation engages in ways that address issues like book displays or Internet access. So we have different conversations with the librarians today, but we find that our very core mission – part of our mission statement says that we'll fiercely defend the right of librarians and libraries to offer whatever may legally be published or presented to the world. We take a very broad approach to that, so that we're looking at displays, community engagement forums, internet access, even social media. That's actually a leading issue, now, for libraries because we are now seeing new precedent come up from court decisions that if you are public agency like a public library and you host a social media account, you may well be creating a limited public forum that directs how you may engage with the public on that social media account. So it's a very interesting time to be working in this area because of the changes that we're seeing in what libraries do in their communities and how they're available to their communities.

**KENNEALLY:** You raise the question of privacy and confidentiality when it comes to library use. Have there been any recent challenges to that in situations, perhaps, when a government agency or a police force is looking to know just which books or what websites a library user has been accessing?



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CALDWELL-STONE: We find that today, like many people do, that the privacy challenge arises not necessarily from the government, although that remains a present issue. We did support librarians who were resisting Patriot Act demand for records a few years ago – the Connecticut Four – and we continue to be vigilant about those issues. But much of that’s settled law now. But what we’re finding is that libraries often engage with their users through third-party platforms like OverDrive or through research databases run by third-party vendors, and we find that that’s not always as secure as we’d like it to be, that data is being shared about individuals’ use of those platforms, and we’re struggling to address that situation. And I speak more broadly for the profession as whole on these privacy issues. But the foundation does participate with coalitions, both in DC and in the profession to advance best practices and to examine both legislation and regulations that might enhance individuals’ privacy. We also help assist librarians and professional organizations to develop standards for privacy that address the issues of all this data that’s shared via the Internet through apps, through platforms that might identify an individual user’s reading habits.

KENNEALLY: The ALA certainly used the Internet as a force for good in the case of a Kickstarter campaign to support publication of a book that is commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Freedom to Read Foundation, and the book is known *Reading Dangerously*. Tell us about the Kickstarter campaign and if someone does purchase the book, what they’ll find inside the cover.

CALDWELL-STONE: Our Kickstarter campaign was our first effort at crowd funding, and it was a success, we achieved our goals. But we wanted to commemorate our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in a way that was both fun and illuminating. It was thought that we could identify some books that we’ve defended in the past through litigation or through support for the individual librarian who is fighting that censorship battle, as well as provide some historical context and look to the future. So that was the genesis of creating *Reading Dangerously*. We have oral history in the words of Judith Krug, herself, who was the founder of the foundation back in 1969, as well as excerpts from banned books and graphic novels that I’m sure people will find entertaining and illuminating, and a final look toward the future by James LaRue, who is the immediate past executive director of the foundation. So they’ll get a great little volume that is a really wonderfully graphically designed volume that remembers the past and looks to the future, and illustrates, really, a little bit of slice of history for the foundation. We’re very proud of this little specialty publication. I think that anyone who orders it and reads it will both find the history fascinating and its examination of what can be censored by library boards and school boards across the country an interesting find, as well.



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KENNEALLY: Some of the titles that are excerpted in this book of collection of works that have been under examination and stress over time from those forces that wish to remove them from library collections – these works include *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, *The Hate U Give* by Angela (sic) Thomas, the graphic novel *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi. Do you have a particular favorite yourself?

CALDWELL-STONE: Oh, it's hard to know, but I think *Persepolis* is one of my favorites. I actually have a great memory of that. *Persepolis* was actually pulled from the shelves in classrooms of the Chicago Public Schools, and the foundation is based here in Chicago. We heard about it the day it happened, and students at Lane Technical High School here in Chicago immediately took to the street to protest the removal of the novel. They so loved it that the minute that they heard that it was being re – and it was literally being removed from their hands in the classroom – they hit the streets and started a protest. We just made an immediate decision, we all pulled up stakes, hopped in a taxi, and we went and joined the protest with them. There's actually a photograph of that protest in *Reading Dangerously* to record that event.

But I think that that graphic novel, that coming of age story and the humanity in it and its ability to reach across cultures and talk about universal experiences, I really do love that particular book and also the associated memories of working with the students of CPS to challenge the censorship of that book which the students working in concert with FTRF, with the ACLU, managed to get put back on the shelves of the school board's libraries within a few weeks.

KENNEALLY: Well, it certainly seems that while a great deal has changed since 1969, not entirely is that true because 1969, young people protesting what they saw as injustice, and 2019, the very same thing.

CALDWELL-STONE: Yes, absolutely. And it's the one thing that we see is that young people are very engaged with what they're learning and what they're reading and defending their rights.

We had the same situation with the students in Tucson, Arizona, when they closed down the Mexican-American studies program. In that situation it was very sad. They, again, went into the classroom, took the books out of the hands of the students and dropped them in boxes marked 'Banned' and took those books away. For those students those books represented their culture, their heritage, their identity as individuals, and to be told that those books were banned was one of the worst things that we ever heard about. We were very privileged to be invited to make the First Amendment argument on behalf of those students before the Ninth



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Circuit Court of Appeals. It was just very gratifying that our legal representatives led by our General Counsel, Theresa Chmara, were able to craft briefs that persuaded the courts to uphold the First Amendment of those students, their right to that education, to those educational materials, and struck down the law that had banned those books from their classrooms.

**KENNEALLY:** Deborah Caldwell-Stone of the American Library Association, congratulations on 50 years of the Freedom to Read Foundation, and congratulations on the launch of your book commemorating that anniversary, *Reading Dangerously*. And thank you for joining us on Beyond the Book.

**CALDWELL-STONE:** Thank you for having me, Chris. Very much appreciated.

**KENNEALLY:** Beyond the Book is produced by Copyright Clearance Center. Our co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. Subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts and follow us on Twitter and Facebook. The complete Beyond the Book podcast archive is available at [beyondthebook.com](http://beyondthebook.com).

I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for listening and join us again soon on CCC's Beyond the Book.

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