

Think First

JEA
press rights
commission

Free expression
through
responsible
journalism

Chuck Dill, JEA's Administrator of the Year 2002, award speech

PRINCIPAL CHUCK DILL

JEA's Administrator of the Year 2002

of Johnsburg High School, Johnsburg, Ill.

Delivered at the JEA/NSPA Awards Luncheon

Nov. 23, 2002, in Dallas, Texas

It is difficult for me to tell you how proud I am to receive this award. In a lot of ways it is the crowning achievement of my career. However, it is also somewhat embarrassing, because the truth is that if it weren't for the students that I work with and the leadership provided by the JHS adviser Randy Swikle, I wouldn't be getting this award. It really belongs to them a lot more than it does to me, and I'd like to express my deepest gratitude to those individuals.

When I learned that I had to give a 15-minute speech, I thought to myself, "You've got to be kidding. What could I possibly say to hold teachers' attention for 15 minutes?" I used to think that I had important things to say, but Randy once told me that the only difference between hell and my faculty meetings was that in hell, you knew you were dead, and in my faculty meetings you wish you were.

For centuries, theologians and philosophers have been debating the nature of man. Questions like "Why are we here?" and "How do we explain good and evil?" are questions that each belief system confronts. Out of this debate, every major religion has devised a code of behavior. Simply stated, most have two major axioms: Love God, and treat others, as you want to be treated. If you are a Christian, you will recognize "Love your neighbor as yourself." This statement challenges us to be the best that we can as human beings. If we would all follow this tenet, imagine what a different world we would live in. Hate would be abolished. War would be abolished. Hunger would be abolished. Crime would disappear.

These words describe what it is to be the best we can be as human beings, and they give us a target to shoot for. We don't always live up to these ideals, but most of us believe that the Supreme Being challenges us to do so.

Now I ask you to narrow your focus a little and look at what describes the best that we can be as Americans. For me, it is the First Amendment. The freedoms that are described in those 45 words and the code of conduct that it calls us to follow are the targets that we as Americans struggle to hit.

As a society we haven't always lived up to these ideals. We only have to look back 150 years to find half a million souls in chains. It's been less than 100 years since women could vote.

Even today we still have not lived up to the full potential of the ideals articulated in the First Amendment. But we are getting better, and I believe that is occurring because we have a clear target that was articulated by our Founding Fathers. At the time these ideals were put to paper, they were radical and revolutionary. It was almost universally accepted that rights and freedoms were given and could be taken away by the king, not-as our Founding Fathers believed-that fundamental rights are given by God and

Free expression through responsible journalism

cannot be taken away by men. To illustrate these two ideas, let me relate a story as told by Charles Haynes, a pre-eminent First Amendment scholar.

It's a story of immigration to New Amsterdam in 1654 and Rhode Island in 1658. Even though it happened a long time ago, it is timely today because it illustrates one of the main philosophical issues that Americans have argued about since our Constitution was written. But more about that later.

Our story begins with the first Jewish families that immigrated to America. They weren't the first Jewish people to arrive in America, because some Jews came with the Spanish. But they were the first families. It is the contrast between what happened to the people in the 1654 arrival and the 1658 arrival that I want to talk to you about.

These two groups of people came to America because the Dutch lost control of Brazil, where they were living. The Portuguese took control, and their attitude toward Jews was significantly different than the Dutch. The Dutch tolerated Jews, and the Portuguese did not. The Portuguese gave the Jews who were living in Brazil two choices: Stay in Brazil, convert to Christianity, and become "moranos," which is a very derogatory term that loosely translates to "swine." They called them moranos because they really never believed that they would convert, and they intended to take advantage of them whenever they could.

They could leave all their possessions in Brazil and go. By the 1600s, Jews had been wandering the globe for several centuries, and many decided to leave. The group that left in 1654 chose New Amsterdam (or New York) as a destination. It wasn't a bad choice. After all, the Dutch were in control, and they would have felt right at home.

However, when they arrived, Peter Styvestant, who was the governor, didn't want them. In his mind, the situation was simple. The problem was one of pollution. If we let them into "our" country, then they will pollute "our" country, and it won't be ours anymore. His direct quote to his board of control in Holland was, "The Jews are a repugnant and deceitful race. Giving them liberty, we cannot refuse the Lutherans and the Papists." I don't know how you feel about that statement, but perhaps you, like me, belong to one of those groups and would have been highly offended.

Styvestant was overruled by his board in Holland—some of whom were Jews—for economic reasons, but they told him they didn't have to give them liberty; just let them in. They had to tolerate them. In other words, he didn't have to let them own property, worship openly, or enjoy the rights of a citizen. Throughout our history, we have had groups of people who have felt the same way. They have developed policies, which have said this is our country, our state, our school, and our group. You keep out!

Fortunately, the story doesn't end there. Otherwise, we would be like many other nations in the world. Many nations tolerate people, but few accept them with full liberties. Those nations believe that rights are given by the government and can be taken away. This was the universal practice in the 1600s. Remember, in America we believe that all people have liberty, and we will protect it. But we don't give it, and we can't take it back. The second arrival was in Rhode Island. Rhode Island was an extraordinary experiment. One that in essence gave us the ideals that we try to live up to today.



Think First

Materials were produced for this Web site by the Journalism Education Association (<http://jeapressrights.org>) and the Center for Scholastic Journalism <http://jmc.kent.edu/cs/>).

Free expression through responsible journalism

Roger Williams, the leader of Rhode Island, told the Jews that they could own property, build houses, participate in the government, and build a synagogue. Roger Williams believed that his mission in life was to build a “haven for conscience.”

That really has been our main story in America. In fact, Jefferson, Madison, and others relied on him for the framework of our country, and the rest-as they say-is history.

Now let’s move that story into the Twenty-first Century and into two high schools. The first school we call X, and the second we will call 45 for the 45 words in the First Amendment.

It’s a beautiful, sunny, warm day. You walk into school X. The parking lot on the school grounds is empty. Students are all dressed pretty much the same and are sitting in neat rows, memorizing material. The principal is in his office, and the teachers are lecturing. We examine the high school newspaper. It seems to be used as a pep club memo. To the quick observer, this may seem like a model high school. Things are truly “under control.”

On that same beautiful sunny day, we walk into High School 45. We notice on the way in that there are a group of students engaged in prayer at the flagpole. As we enter the school, the receptionist tells us that there are two student/teacher/administrator committee meetings in progress. The first is meeting with the assistant principal to discuss a revision of the discipline code; the second is meeting with the principal to discuss revising the bell schedule.

We now begin to examine the students. Lots of them are dressing very differently, yet they all seem to respect each other. As we round corners, we aren’t sure what color students’ hair will be or which way it will be pointing. Finally, we look at the student newspaper. All kinds of issues are covered, including those that are controversial. Students have control of the paper and its contents and view it as a vehicle to exchange ideas.

This is the school where I want to be principal. Where students are actually practicing democracy and celebrating diversity. It’s a place where real learning occurs. Where learning is an exciting adventure. Where we don’t eliminate engagement, diminish spirit, deny diversity, inhibit potential, destroy curiosity, discourage questioning, or in other ways impair the enthusiasm of a learner. It’s where teachers and administrators give students real responsibility-not cosmetic input or pretend autonomy. Where students are partners-not mere subordinates- with parents, teachers, administrators, and others in the community. Students can offer their perspectives of issues and events freely, even if others personally find them disagreeable. Students are allowed to demand accountability from teachers and administrators just as those people demand accountability from students.

If this doesn’t describe your school, then I challenge you to begin the revolution. In essence, I want you to be the next Roger Williams. I want you to create a school that is a haven for conscience. As newspaper advisers and students, you have the skills to make it happen.

Let me tell you what I believe are the components of a journalism program that can change a school.

Think First

Materials were produced for this Web site by the Journalism Education Association (<http://jeapressrights.org>) and the Center for Scholastic Journalism <http://jmc.kent.edu/csjs>.

Free expression through responsible journalism

The program should have a design that clearly states the journalism program's mission, vision, and policies. You should include a code of ethics that can be useful in guiding decisions.

Qualified instructors. The adviser must have a clear understanding of the First Amendment, how it can be applied to the school environment, and how it calls for the balance of freedom and responsibility.

Responsible student leadership. Develop policies to attract outstanding students who reject mediocrity in favor of pursuing excellence. Determine criteria for selecting editors who have effective leadership skills and will guard the principle of student control of content within the parameters of law and safety.

A professional rapport among student journalists, faculty, administrators, and other members of the community. Newspapers have an adversarial function, and one should not mistake critical comments as a personal affront. Focus on issues, and remember that bad news does not have to have a bad effect.

Commitment to a free and responsible press. Respect and protect the rights of students, and guide them to mature judgment and ethical behavior. Reject prior review and arbitrary censorship. Favor ethics and logic in problem solving and in finding common ground.

I am a principal. The superintendent signs my paycheck, but I work for my students. My job is to help them discover their own way. The student publication can be a beacon of light that will lead people to a better understanding of democracy, a greater awareness of ethics, and a more dedicated commitment to the ideals of our society. It can develop as the crucible of a true First Amendment school.

The newspaper can be a great learning tool, but only if we refuse to dull its edge!