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FIRE QUARTERLY

WINTER 2026



**SHE WAS
FIRED FOR
AN OPINION**

**HE WAS
JAILED FOR
A MEME**

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A WINNING MESSAGE

Dear friends,

Whew! 2025 was quite the year for the free speech world. As regular readers of this fine *Quarterly* know, last year we faced an onslaught of threats to free speech — government jawboning, regulations on AI and social media, violence on campus, and censorship at town halls. Our team might not have slept much, but they sure showed up, over and over again, to fight for free speech wherever FIRE's work was needed.

One of the things I love best about being FIRE's chief operating officer is my role in our daily Rapid Response meetings. Every morning, a group of us meet to go through the day's big free speech stories and decide how we're going to respond.

Is something ripe for litigation and we need to move fast to get in touch with potential plaintiffs? Did the Supreme Court issue a First Amendment opinion that we need to analyze to get a quick media advisory out? Is a bad bill moving fast and we need to get legislative boots on the ground ASAP? A college president banning an event he doesn't like? A mayor shutting up her constituents? And so it goes, every day.

I also host our Monthly Members Call, where throughout the year we answer your questions in real time. At a recent one, a member asked, "Do the people at FIRE ever disagree?" I chuckled because of course we do! Most mornings during the Rapid Response meetings, in fact. When we're dealing with sensitive and complicated issues, the conversations aren't always easy. But we're able to disagree productively, challenge one another, presume goodwill, call out blind spots, and play devil's advocate. Ultimately, we come out way better for it.

I hope when you look at our work — whether in these pages, on social media, in our legal briefs and advocacy letters, at our events, or in news coverage — you can see that patient and nuanced analysis at work. I also hope you find it refreshing, especially in a world that too often values one-sided clickbait and knee-jerk "hot takes."

For my 18 years at FIRE, principle over politics has been our signature approach. And you know what? It works. We're winning cases — both in and out of court. We're shaping the law to shore up First Amendment rights. We're educating the next generation. And we've continued to gain public recognition as the group that can help make sense of America's free speech challenges.

Of course, none of this would be possible without the incredible generosity of donors like you. Your support powers it all.

While we might not sleep a lot, we sleep better knowing we've got so many people behind us who know fighting for free speech is important, even if it isn't always easy.

Yours,



Alisha Glennon
FIRE Chief Operating Officer



DON'T HOLD YOUR TONGUE, WE'VE GOT YOUR BACK



Don't mess with Texas students

In the fall *FIRE Quarterly*, you read about Texas' sweeping law banning all expressive activity on college campuses between 10 p.m. and 8 a.m. And you read about the student groups fighting back with FIRE, from political organizations to music groups to the student newspaper.

We're pleased to report that in October, a federal court blocked the campus speech curfew while the case proceeds, protecting students' right to speak freely on campus every hour of the day, every week of the year. "The First Amendment does not have a bedtime of 10:00 p.m.," the opinion reads. "The burden is on the government to prove that its actions are narrowly tailored to achieve a compelling governmental interest. It has not done so."

Iowa pollster vindicated

A federal district court dismissed a lawsuit against Iowa pollster and FIRE client J. Ann Selzer. The lawsuit, brought by a subscriber to *The Des Moines Register*, resulted from a poll Selzer published before the 2024 presidential election that predicted then-Vice President Kamala Harris leading in Iowa. The suit alleged that Selzer's poll, which missed the final result by a wide margin, constituted "fraud."

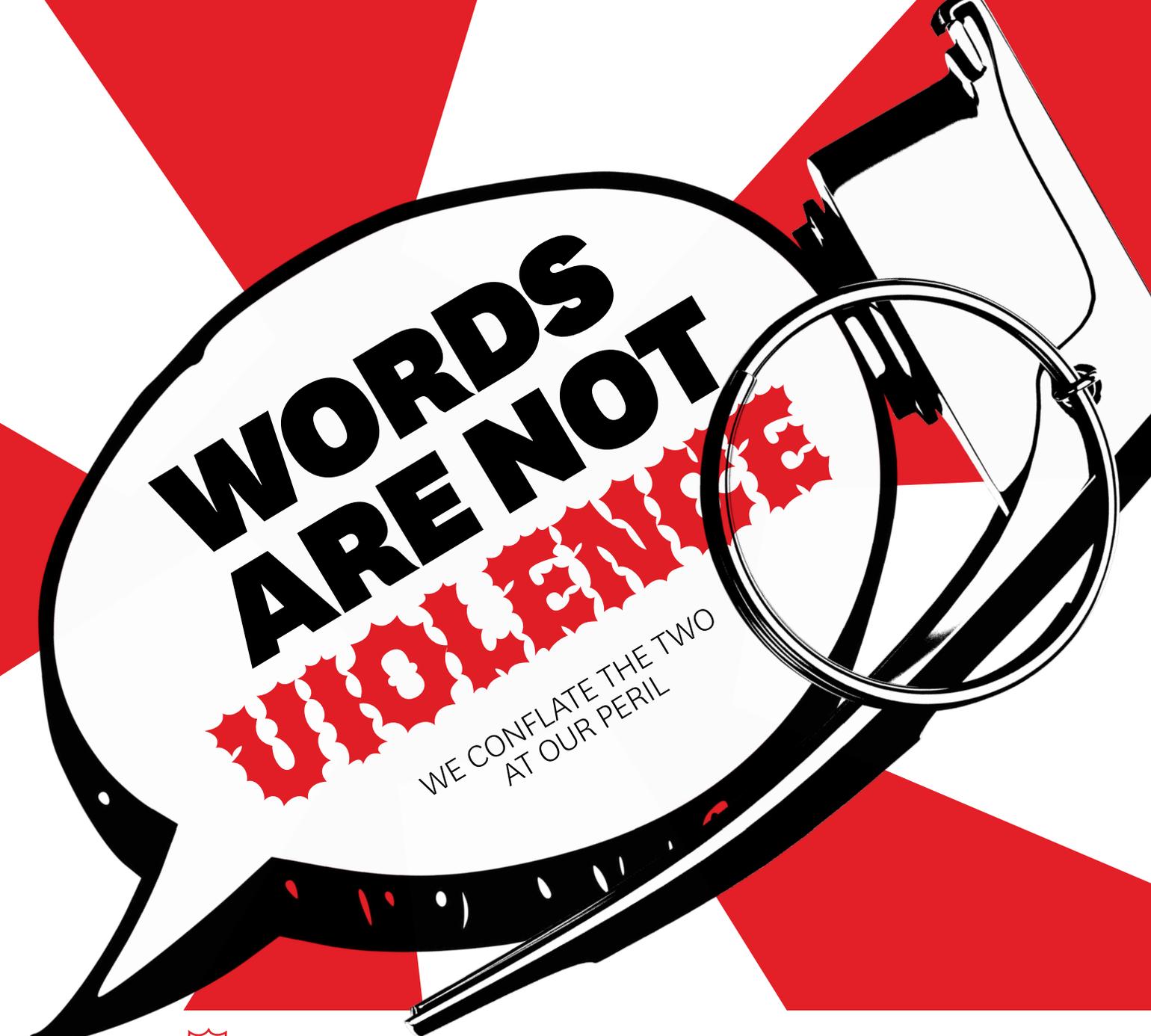
The court held that the First Amendment bars these claims, protecting Selzer's right to engage in political polling — even if it turned out to be inaccurate — and that the plaintiff was "invok[ing] mere buzzwords and speculation."

This suit was a copycat of a still-pending suit filed by President Donald Trump against Selzer in December 2024, in which FIRE also represents her. "President Trump's suit makes the same frivolous arguments against the same defendants," said FIRE Supervising Senior Attorney Conor Fitzpatrick. "We are confident it will meet the same fate."

A new lease on speech in New Jersey

In September, the town council of West Caldwell, New Jersey, proposed an ordinance capable of wreaking havoc on free speech rights for local residents. It would have required townspeople to apply for a permit at least a month in advance of participating in a public demonstration or special event with 25 attendees or more, and to arrange for \$2 million in insurance — *regardless of the size or nature of the event*. This would instantly kill spontaneous protests, candlelight vigils — even yoga in the park! — effectively putting a price tag on fundamental rights.

But residents were not about to let their rights slip away so easily. FIRE wrote the city and publicized the story, galvanizing public support through a "Know Your Rights" webinar and Take Action campaign. After a packed council meeting where more than 30 people spoke out against the ordinance, it was tabled and eventually withdrawn, leaving residents free to speak another day.



WORDS ARE NOT

WE CONFLATE THE TWO
AT OUR PERIL



FIRE survey of college students published in December uncovered something alarming: 9 in 10 believe words can be violence.

Conducted in the aftermath of the assassination of conservative activist Charlie Kirk, the survey suggests many students took exactly the wrong lesson from the tragedy — and it’s creating an environment of fear. Students at Utah Valley University, the site of the shooting, in particular are worried about expressing views and even attending class.

FIRE President and CEO Greg Lukianoff stepped into that environment in November, telling UVU students that the belief in resolving disputes with words instead of violence makes America exceptional.

“Free speech is one of the greatest tools for peace ever invented,” said Greg. “We abandon it at our peril.”

Greg closed by emphasizing the importance of standing on principle, no matter whose speech rights are violated, sharing that FIRE has recently fielded many cases (like the following two) involving censorship of Kirk’s critics.

“The best way to honor Mr. Kirk is not to criminalize speech,” wrote Greg in a *New York Times* op-ed. “It is to ensure that argument remains the alternative to violence.”



“I took an oath to defend the Constitution. Now, it’s time to stand up for it again.”

- **MONICA MEEKS,**
FIRE PLAINTIFF

Combat veteran loses government job for an opinion

After serving 20 years in the U.S. Army, Monica Meeks joined the Tennessee Department of Commerce and Insurance in 2016. Since then, she has only received stellar performance reviews — but that didn’t protect her from being fired over an opinion she shared outside of work.

In her private life, Monica is politically outspoken, and she enjoys trading hot takes with her old “battle buddies.” After the Kirk assassination, Monica responded to a friend’s Facebook post about Kirk with the remark, “The way you tap dance for White Supremacist should be studied!”

Monica’s post was never intended to go further than two friends sparring over politics. But it escaped her personal circle and was swept up in a wave of cancellation attempts following the Kirk shooting.

Only about 15 individuals on X called for Monica’s firing — including comments marked as “probable spam” — but only hours after the posts began, Commissioner Carter Lawrence sent a termination letter to Monica and publicly announced her firing. Lawrence’s letter didn’t mention any performance issues and indicated that he was firing her solely for her “inflammatory and insulting comment” on Facebook.

“You may disagree with Monica’s take on Charlie Kirk. But letting a few angry individuals get a public employee fired for off-the-clock speech, even when it has no impact on the workplace, will inevitably boomerang back on people with views you do support,” said FIRE staff attorney Cary Davis.

FIRE is asking the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Tennessee to find that Lawrence retaliated against Monica for exercising her First Amendment rights, to award her damages, and to reinstate her to her position.

Retired police officer spends 37 days in jail for a Facebook meme

After the Kirk assassination, retired police officer Larry Bushart shared a meme on a Facebook thread about a vigil in Perry County, Tennessee. The meme quoted President Donald Trump saying, “We have to get over it” following a January 2024 school shooting at Perry High School in Iowa. It included the commentary, “This seems relevant today ...”

The next night, four officers came to Larry’s home, handcuffed him, and took him to jail. He was locked up for “threatening mass violence at a school.” His bond — an astronomical \$2 million!

Police justified the arrest by saying that people took the meme as a threat to their high school, which has a similar name to a school in Iowa where a shooting occurred 20 months earlier. When FIRE asked police and the school for records of the “hysteria” allegedly caused by the post, the school said they had no records — and the police refused to respond.

Larry was jailed for more than five weeks, during which he lost his post-retirement medical transportation job and missed the birth of his granddaughter. Only after the arrest went viral did prosecutors drop the charges.

Now Larry, who spent over three decades working with law enforcement, is teaming up with FIRE to sue the Perry County sheriff and others, seeking compensatory and punitive damages to vindicate his First Amendment rights.

“A free country does not dispatch police in the dead of night to pull people from their homes because a sheriff objects to their social media posts,” FIRE Senior Attorney Adam Steinbaugh told *The Washington Post*.

In America, there are very few exceptions to the First Amendment, including true threats or incitement of imminent lawless action. Jailing first, justifying later, flips those limits on their head. If officials can arrest you because they dislike your social media posts, then none of us are safe to express ourselves.



NEW JERSEY SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER SILENCED

FOR ASKING CONSTITUENTS ABOUT PROPOSED TAX INCREASE



“I didn’t join the school board to be told to shut up.”

- **GAIL NAZARENE,**
FIRE PLAINTIFF

A local school board member’s Facebook post to community members about a tax hike should have started a conversation — instead, it led to censorship.

FIRE is suing the commissioner of New Jersey’s Department of Education and members of the state’s School Ethics Commission to stop them from abusing a law to chill the speech of an elected school board member who used social media to seek her constituents’ input.

“New Jersey officials claim the authority to punish me simply for asking folks questions about important issues, particularly when it affects their wallets,” said Gail Nazarene, an elected school board member, Navy veteran, and grandma in Alloway Township. “I should be free

to communicate with constituents and get their views without being censored by state officials.”

In April, Gail used Facebook to discuss tax increases and other school issues with constituents. In one post, she asked, “As a resident of Alloway, I am wondering what other residents think about a 9-15% school tax increase?” She clarified in her later posts that she was asking in her personal capacity. But another school board member saw the posts and filed a complaint against her, claiming Gail had violated New Jersey’s School Ethics Act because she allegedly had spoken on the board’s behalf. The complaint is pending before the state’s School Ethics Commission.

“Americans deserve to know what their elected officials think about important issues,” said FIRE attorney Daniel Zahn. “New Jersey is muzzling elected officials and preventing them from talking with their community, the very people they were elected to represent.”

The state broadly interprets the School Ethics Act to bar elected officials from discussing issues relating to schools on social media. And this isn’t the first time it’s done so. The School Ethics Commission has previously warned elected officials against engaging with constituents on social media and previously interpreted the act to prevent elected school board members from discussing matters of public concern on social media and in op-eds.

But the First Amendment protects Gail’s right to speak freely on such issues.

Gail has stopped soliciting constituent feedback online. She fears any posts about school board issues will lead to punishment, including reprimand, censure, suspension, or removal. But she also is concerned about the loss of First Amendment freedoms for her and her constituents.

“When the state silences school board members, parents and taxpayers are kept in the dark,” said FIRE attorney Greg Greubel. “The School Ethics Act can’t be turned into an unconstitutional gag rule.”

FIRE’s federal lawsuit asks the court to declare New Jersey’s School Ethics Act unconstitutional as interpreted by the state and stop its use against elected officials speaking out about public issues.

SECURING FREEDOM AT THE DIGITAL FRONTIER

GOING BOLDLY INTO A FREE SPEECH-FRIENDLY FUTURE

Cosmos Institute collaboration moves forward

“Will AI sharpen our thinking and become a partner in seeking truth — or will it quietly control what we’re allowed to see?” That’s the question at the heart of FIRE’s collaboration with the Cosmos Institute, an organization dedicated to fusing technological innovation with deep inquiry.

To stack the deck in favor of AI applications that prioritize truth and maximize freedom, we launched a million-dollar grant program, awarding money to scholars and technologists dedicated to furthering these aims. The first cohort includes computer scientists, researchers, designers, and entrepreneurs. Their projects include:

Argument Debugger, AI that finds gaps in reasoning and suggests repairs.

Socratic Mirror, an AI thought partner that interrogates and invites deeper thinking.

TruthLens, a tool that detects censorship by comparing different AI model outputs.

And this is just the beginning. As a second cohort’s projects began, FIRE and Cosmos also hosted a symposium in Austin with thought leaders on the threats and opportunities for AI in free speech and truth-seeking. We look forward to continuing to explore these critical issues together.



Amicus briefs counter censorship in key social media cases

FIRE continues to fight unconstitutional regulations on social media platforms wherever they arise, filing *amicus* briefs in court cases implicating the rights of millions.

When Massachusetts sued Meta and Instagram over the “design features” of their platform, claiming that they addict young users, we countered. Our brief urged the court to recognize that the “design features” at issue cannot be separated from the content they convey to users and are expressive in their own right.

We also fought Ohio’s Parental Notification by Social Media Operators Act, which would require children under 16 to obtain parental consent before creating a social media account. We explained that in practice this would require all users, including adults, to age-verify in order to access social media, placing an unconstitutional burden on speech.

FIRE legal director testifies before Congress

When the Senate Commerce Committee held a hearing on “How Uncle Sam Jawboned Big Tech Into Silencing Americans,” FIRE was proud to have our very own Will Creeley testify as the free speech expert.

Sitting next to top tech leaders and across from a host of senators, Will made clear: the bipartisan practice of “jawboning” (government bullying to silence protected speech) betrays our national commitment to freedom of expression.

This invitation to testify is more than an honor — it’s recognition. FIRE has become the go-to expert on free expression, trusted by leaders across the political spectrum.

“The First Amendment does not abide mob tactics.”

- WILL CREELEY,
FIRE LEGAL DIRECTOR

INDIANA UNIVERSITY'S FREE SPEECH CRISIS

WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO TURN AROUND AMERICA'S
WORST PUBLIC UNIVERSITY FOR FREE SPEECH?



“I had a sniper gun pointed at me when trying to defend a protest that was in compliance with school policies.”

The student who wrote that line in FIRE’s annual free speech survey wasn’t using a metaphor. They were describing a spring afternoon in 2024 at Indiana University’s Dunn Meadow, where officers with rifles took positions on the roof of the Indiana Memorial Union over the heads of student protesters.

The night before, administrators had convened an ad hoc meeting that rewrote IU’s Outdoor Spaces policy to require approval for structures that had long been permitted. By morning, a peaceful protest was recast as a policy violation. By noon, state police had taken a “closed sniper position” above the lawn.

FIRE wrote IU leadership objecting to the eleventh-hour policy change and the resulting crackdown and warning IU that manipulating rules to curtail disfavored protest is incompatible with a public university’s First Amendment obligations. Unfortunately, the university’s crackdown wasn’t an isolated incident, but a warning for what would follow.

On April 16, 2024, nearly 1,000 faculty members came together for an unprecedented meeting where 93% of those present voted no confidence in IU’s leadership. The no-confidence movement explicitly cited encroachments on academic freedom and concerns about viewpoint discrimination.

One flashpoint was the university’s December 2023 suspension of associate professor Abdulkader Sinno after a dispute over a room reservation he coordinated for the Palestine Solidarity Committee, the student group he advised.

Another was art. That same month, IU’s Eskenazi Museum abruptly canceled a long-planned retrospective of Palestinian-American painter Samia Halaby, notifying the artist it would no longer show her work in a terse letter invoking concerns about security and the “integrity of the exhibit.”

IU’s Israel-Palestine-related cancellations didn’t run in only one political direction, either. In March 2024, IU officials urged IU Hillel to postpone an event with Mosab Hassan Yousef, a prominent



pro-Israel activist and Hamas critic, citing security threats. Instead of securing the event, IU “postponed” it, and apparently never rescheduled.

By the publication of FIRE’s 2026 College Free Speech Rankings, the numbers matched the mood. Indiana University ranked 255th out of 257 institutions surveyed, making it the worst-ranked public university in America. Roughly 1 in 4 IU students reported discipline or threats of discipline for their expression, and nearly three-quarters of the faculty said the administration does not protect academic freedom.

This fall, IU’s crack-down reached the newsroom. Student editors at the *Indiana Daily Student* ran two pieces: one on IU’s

suspension of the Palestine Solidarity Committee, another on IU’s abysmal free speech ranking. Students say Media School Dean David Tolchinsky pressed them to suppress the coverage. When they refused, the university ordered the paper’s print edition halted just before homecoming. When Jim Rodenbush, the director of student media, declined to enforce content restrictions, he was fired.

FIRE’s Student Press Freedom Initiative immediately jumped into action, condemning the firing as apparent retaliation and the print-ban directive as unconstitutional censorship by a public university. The students’ response captured the stakes: an image of an empty newspaper rack on campus captioned with a single word in block letters: “CENSORED.”

IU has since reversed the print shutdown amid national outcry and FIRE’s advocacy, but the university still has a crisis on its hands. This is a campus where students self-silence to survive the semester and where faculty measure every sentence against the week’s political weather.

In November, FIRE answered in one forum the university can’t control: the public square. Our billboards in Bloomington and Indianapolis name the problem plainly, pointing readers to see the record for themselves. IU has a chance here to do the right thing, but if they don’t, more shaming will follow, in places where IU’s leaders, alumni, and visitors can’t miss it. The point is not spectacle but accountability: to hold a mirror up to a public university that has tried, repeatedly, to dodge the image it has made for itself.

HER MUSIC SCHOOL EXPELLED HER WITHOUT DUE PROCESS

WE ORCHESTRATED A COMEBACK CONCERT.

Rebecca Bryant Novak was warned to stay quiet. She didn't.

During her first semester as a conducting doctoral student at the Eastman School of Music — a world-renowned conservatory within the University of Rochester — she blew the whistle on a faculty member's alleged harassment. After a year-long investigation, a panel of faculty and administrators confirmed the professor violated the harassment policy and that Eastman failed to respond appropriately. But the school didn't protect her. It retaliated.

While the investigation was underway, the Title IX coordinator assigned to Rebecca's case threatened her with a defamation lawsuit after she spoke publicly about her experience. When Rebecca kept speaking out, Eastman expelled her. No hearing. No due process.

FIRE launched a Take Action campaign urging the music school to reinstate Rebecca. Then, we took our advocacy a step further, doing something we've never done before: hosting a classical music concert.

At the Hochstein School Performance Hall, more than 100 people came together for an orchestral concert conducted by Rebecca. The evening included works by composers who faced censorship and messages from FIRE staff, illuminating the timeless connection between civil liberties and artistic expression.



“There have been situations where I’ve stayed silent before. My actual experience is that staying silent doesn’t help you that much.”

- REBECCA BRYANT NOVAK,
FIRE PLAINTIFF

HELLMAN FELLOWSHIP SETS FUTURE LAWYERS UP FOR SUCCESS

Attention law students: FIRE is accepting applications for its next cohort of Hellman Fellows!

What is the Hellman Fellowship? The Arthur D. Hellman Fellowship in First Amendment Litigation is a 10-week program for law students committed to defending free expression. It offers an \$8,000 stipend and runs from June through August. Fellows work at FIRE's Philadelphia or Washington, D.C. office and contribute to litigation that protects freedom of speech and thought.

Why apply? As a Hellman Fellow, you will become deeply connected with FIRE's mission, working closely with our litigators on projects that advance free speech. For many fellows, the journey doesn't end there: Some have returned to work at FIRE, joined our Legal Network, authored supporting *amicus* briefs, or served as our local counsel.

Who should apply? Collaborative, detail-oriented students with excellent academic credentials and a passion for civil liberties and public-interest litigation. Apply today at fire.org/careers





DONOR SPOTLIGHT:

GRANT & CYNTHIA SCHAUMBURG

We met Alan Kors at a Cato Institute conference in 1999, the year he and Harvey Silverglate founded FIRE. At the conference, Kors gave a speech about the betrayal of liberty on America's college campuses. We had the chance to talk to him in person, and it convinced us to support FIRE.

Over the years, FIRE has educated us about the Orwellian speech environment on college campuses, opening our eyes to the negative impact of campus speech restrictions. Our own alma maters are ranked 242 and 245 out of 257 schools in FIRE's College Free Speech Rankings, both receiving an F.

FIRE has also taught us some of the finer points about free speech. Since we live in Massachusetts, where often only one political view is acceptable, we sometimes avoid saying what we think. This behavior is rational for some state residents, such as college professors, who could face firing for expressing their opinions. Fortunately, we are not in that situation, and FIRE's observations and analysis make us less reticent to speak our minds.

Each year FIRE's presence and influence has grown. It is now regularly cited in articles and editorials about speech and bias. We are happy to have met Alan Kors and to continue to contribute to FIRE's important mission today.

JOIN FIRE'S EMBER CLUB

As valued members of FIRE's Ember Club — a distinguished group of our closest allies and investors who contribute \$2,500 or more each year — Grant and Cynthia play a critical role in advancing our mission.

In recognition of this commitment, we welcome Ember Club members into FIRE's inner circle, offering exclusive opportunities designed to keep them informed and connected to the impact of their generosity. These opportunities include:

- Personal updates on the issues you care about
- Invitations to events and meetings with FIRE staff
- Print copies of our latest reports and publications
- A distinctive Ember Club lapel pin
- Recognition in FIRE's Annual Report (with your permission)
- Signed copies of FIRE-authored books

Of course, the greatest benefit is knowing that your support helps FIRE move swiftly and boldly to protect free speech on campus, in the courts, and in our culture.



To learn more, contact Ashley Adams, FIRE's senior director of development, at ashley@fire.org or 215-717-3473.



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SAVE THE DATE!
**CELEBRATE AMERICA'S
250TH, FIRE STYLE**

Soapbox is FIRE's bold new conference, taking place Nov. 4-6, 2026 in Philadelphia to celebrate America's 250th anniversary with high-impact keynotes, timely panels, and unforgettable entertainment. Join us and hear directly from leading voices in the free speech movement, including:

Daryl Davis: Musician, author, and renowned advocate for dialogue across divides known for his extraordinary work engaging members of hate groups to confront their beliefs.

Lee Rowland: Executive director of the National Coalition Against Censorship who spent two decades with organizations like the ACLU, Brennan Center, and NYCLU.

Matt Taibbi: Award-winning journalist known for fearless reporting on media, politics, and power. A former longtime contributing editor for *Rolling Stone*, Taibbi now writes for *Racket News*.

Nadine Strossen: Professor emerita at New York Law School and former president of the ACLU named one of America's "100 Most Influential Lawyers."

Check out the full roster of featured speakers (so far!), and sign up to receive the latest news and updates at soapbox.fire.org

Questions? Email us at soapbox@fire.org