

Vermont Library Association marks Banned Books Week, Sept. 18-24

Sept. 18-24 is the 40th annual Banned Books Week, created and sustained by the American Library Association "as both a reminder of the unifying power of stories and the divisiveness of censorship, and a call to action for readers across the country to push back against censorship attempts in their communities."

Banned Books Week celebrates the freedom to read and spotlights attempts to censor books in libraries, schools, and bookstores.

The American Library Association maintains lists of books that have been targeted for removal or restriction in libraries and schools. By focusing on these efforts across the country, Banned Books Week hopes to draw national attention to the harms of censorship. The theme this year is "Books Unite Us. Censorship Divides Us."

Vermont has had relatively few attempts to curtail the freedom to read, but a challenge this year in Chester to hosting Drag Queen Story Hour at their local library reminds us that the threat is never far away. Other Vermont librarians report receiving online abuse and threats, usually for providing a wide range of materials.

Vermont Library Association President Kelly McCagg, director of the Burnham Library in Colchester, noted that in the past year the ALA saw 729 challenges nationwide, more than ever before.

"That is a lot of missed opportunities for caregivers to impart their values; and for communities to discover areas of mutual appreciation," said McCagg. "We must do better. Not only working to keep books on our shelves, but educating the public of their intrinsic value."

According to a release from the ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom, those 729 challenges resulted in more than 1,597 individual book challenges or removals. Most targeted books in the past several years were by or about Black or LGBTQIA+ persons. Historically, challenges have also come over a handful of titles deemed to be too racist (*Of Mice and Men*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.)

The rise in challenges in the past few years have coincided with unfounded claims by online disinformation peddlers and some media outlets that organizations promoting diversity are grooming children for sexual predators.

"This is a dangerous time for readers and the public servants who provide access to reading materials," said Deborah Caldwell-Stone, director of the ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom, in a statement. "Readers, particularly students, are losing access to critical information, and librarians and teachers are under attack for doing their jobs."

For 40 years, the annual event has brought together the entire book community — librarians, booksellers, publishers, journalists, teachers, and readers of all types — in shared support of the freedom to seek and to express ideas, even those some consider unorthodox or unpopular.

Drop by your local Vermont library to learn more about Banned Books Week.