

Banned Books Week: September 21 - 28, 2003

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"The book...is an exquisite example of human genius. Where it flourishes, man flourishes. Where it withers, humanity withers. The book is strong. It can endure for a thousand years and more, but there exist those who would put out its eyes, blacken its words, reduce it to a gray heap of ashes, lock it in chains, and let generations live and die in darkness."

– Harrison E. Salisbury, in a lecture at the Library of Congress, 1983

The Biscayne Bay Campus Library of Florida International University in Miami, Florida presented a Banned Book Read Out in celebration of Banned Books Week, September 20 through September 27, 2003. The library hosted a daily one hour reading in the gazebo in front of the library. In fifteen minute segments, volunteer professors from various departments from the university and volunteer librarians from Biscayne Bay read aloud excerpts from books that have been banned, expurgated or challenged in parts of the United States and around the world. Inside, the library presented an impressive visual display of books that have been challenged or banned over the centuries. The library also made available lists of these books to stimulate awareness of the right to read the materials of one's choice.

According to Toni Downs, Associate Executive Director of the library, who enthusiastically supported the idea of the library going outside the traditional library walls to inform the campus of library resources and activities and to advance awareness of intellectual freedom issues so at risk in today's political climate. The librarians of Florida International University contend that their participation in Banned Books Week is as fundamentally critical as it is an invigorating opportunity to express the meaning of Article 3 of the Library Bill of Rights, which states that "Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment." Organizer of the event, Lauren Christos, reference librarian at Biscayne Bay Library was delighted to provide a venue for faculty, librarians, and students to witness the First Amendment of the U.S. Bill Rights in action.

While the American Library Association has a long tradition of supporting Banned Books Week, the American Civil Liberties Union also believes that "Banned Books Week is a time to celebrate literature and examine the roots of intolerance and ignorance that fuel efforts to censor the arts and free expression. Book censorship is neither infrequent nor an issue of the past. Books with clear artistic and cultural merit are still challenged frequently by those who want to control what others read." The freedom to choose what we read is deeply rooted in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Unfortunately, threats against this freedom continue to come from many directions and we must remain vigilant in our opposition to censorship of information.

Indeed, the message of Banned Books Week is more than the freedom to choose or the freedom to express one's opinion even if that opinion is unpopular. The critical message of celebrating Banned Books Week is the essential importance of securing the availability of all viewpoints to everyone who wishes to read them.