Engaging for Change

Annual Report 2012-13
Young people learn the skills and values of journalism best when they’re given ownership of student media and space to create. Freed from heavy-handed censorship, student journalists have brought the entire school community eye-opening stories – about gang violence, teen pregnancy, anti-gay bullying and much more. When students push the envelope to write about controversial topics, they’re crying out for adults to intervene and make things better. We should listen.

The Student Press Law Center is opening eyes and changing minds. We launched the Curehazelwood.org campaign to get America talking about the censorship unleashed by the Supreme Court’s misguided Hazelwood ruling as the cancer on education that it is. More than 3,000 “Hazelwood cancer awareness bracelets” are already in circulation, and student-led campaigns are under way from North Dakota to Kentucky to enact more balanced statutes that protect students against retaliation for candidly addressing public issues.

We organized a November 2012 symposium at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill bringing together experts in law, education, journalism and civics for a two-day retrospective to assess Hazelwood’s toll on education. The SPLC is forging partnerships across each of these fields to develop policies that respect the value of student voice in reforming education.

“I have been so alarmed by the kinds of students coming into our college programs who are completely unprepared for what journalism is about. They think it’s OK to be told what to print and what not to print. They don’t challenge authority like they should. We have to reprogram them. We have to retrain them.”

Prof. David Cuillier
Chair, University of Arizona School of Journalism
Hazelwood Symposium, UNC-Chapel Hill, November 2012

Since 1974, the Student Press Law Center has been a voice for civic engagement, civil dialogue, freedom of expression and open government. SPLC attorneys taught workshops in 13 states and the District of Columbia in 2012, and took nearly 2,000 phone and email inquiries from students and teachers encountering difficulty gathering and sharing information and ideas. We know – because we listen to students every day – that journalism is the gateway through which young people engage with the issues and ideas that excite them. The deficits of civic awareness and of civility in online discourse are well-documented ills. Meaningful participation in journalism can be a solution.

One generation. It’s enough.

At the UNC symposium, “One Generation Under Hazelwood,” SPLC’s Frank LoMonte and Texas attorney Larry Watts listen to lead Hazelwood plaintiff Cathy Kuhlmeier Frey’s story of being censored by her high school.
Answering the call.

The 162 lawyers who make the SPLC Attorney Referral Network are the engine that drives the SPLC’s work. They devote thousands of unpaid hours each year to helping students use the law to do their most fearless, substantive journalistic work. With their aid, students are winning important legal victories.

Georgia’s Sandy Michaels of The Martin Brothers Firm secured the dismissal of unfounded criminal charges against college journalists Judith Kim of Georgia State University and Alisen Redmond of Kennesaw State, arrested while photographing the “Occupy Atlanta” demonstrations.

California’s James Manning and Scott Talkov of Reid & Hellyer, APC, helped win a key First Amendment ruling at the 9th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals in favor of college journalists at Oregon State University, whose newsracks were illegally confiscated and dumped by campus administrators.

During the 2012 legislative session, Indiana lawmakers came within days of final enactment of a bill giving high school principals total control over students’ off-campus lives, making it an offense punishable by expulsion to say or write anything “contrary to school purposes.”

No one spoke up.

Until the SPLC put together a coalition of legal, journalism and education groups to put a stop to a breathtakingly unconstitutional law that would have exposed school whistleblowers to retaliation.

“Thanks for bringing this to our attention,” the head of the state press association wrote to the SPLC. “It would very likely have slipped past my notice.”

“Working at the SPLC allowed me to understand, in raw detail, the daily struggles of so many student journalists. Everything I will pass on to my own students is something I learned or perfected during my time there.”

Brian Schraum
SPLC McCormick Publications Fellow 2010-12
Instructor and Journalism Adviser,
Green River Community College
“Students aren’t the future of journalism.”
“…They’re the present.”

“They’re fulfilling the basic information needs of communities that salaried professionals no longer always can. And because all Americans are more dependent than ever on students to bring them the news of the day, the SPLC’s mission – to make sure journalists of all ages have robust legal protections – is more critical than ever.”

Frank D. LoMonte
SPLC Executive Director

SPLC attorneys train young people to find hard-to-get public records and overcome resistance to disclosure. But we don’t stop there.

We’re generating more impactful stories by teaching journalists step-by-step how to creatively use the information that’s out there. We share the best public-records tips from journalism pros on our podcast and new Tumblr site, and our “Transparency Tuesday” blog provides strategies for getting and using data to tell compelling stories.

SPLC public-records audits have exposed overcharges in campus meal plans, school districts’ widespread evasion of student-rights statutes, and colleges’ secretive expulsions of students for being suicide risks. We’re constantly harnessing new technology to deliver legal information more engagingly, like our CoverItLive chat on analyzing campus crime data.

For the fall 2012 semester, the SPLC distributed 200 copies of a four-episode DVD, “Media Law in a Box,” to 200 college campuses nationwide. Shot at the University of Nevada-Reno, the lectures cover all of the SPLC’s most-asked legal questions and answers.

During 2012, guidance from the SPLC helped student journalists tell groundbreaking stories:

At Oklahoma State University, where The O’Collegian broke the news of a serial sex offender that the campus disciplinary board failed to tell police about.

At Pennsylvania’s Conestoga High School, where reporter Jenna Spoont was named “National High School Journalist of the Year” for a package of stories about the criminalization of “sexting.”

At Otterbein University, where editor Lindsey Hobbs and her staff won the Betty Gage Holland Award for public-affairs reporting, for spotlighting how Otterbein’s creation of an unaccountable in-house police department left the public in the dark about campus crime.

Police on the campuses of private colleges carry all the same authority of state police – they can make arrests and even use deadly force – with none of the same disclosure responsibilities. Nobody was talking about this gaping flaw in state transparency laws – until the SPLC took the lead. Through a campaign of op-eds and friend-of-the-court briefs, the SPLC has put closing this public-safety loophole on the national agenda.

More than 18,000 times a year, visitors to the SPLC.org website use the Center’s “fill-the-blanks” open-records template to generate a request tailored to the laws of their state. Researchers from the University of Arizona documented that the SPLC’s form letter reliably produces a fast reply.

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The Student Press Law Center believes in the power of young voices, and in working cooperatively to solve the problems that inhibit their ability to share ideas.

During 2012, we reaffirmed our commitment to those core beliefs, in a revised five-year Strategic Plan and in further diversifying our 15-member volunteer Board of Directors. For the first time, our Board includes a district school superintendent, Susan Enfield, and a college student, Sommer Ingram, with full voting privileges. Their perspectives will enrich our efforts to keep the SPLC vibrant, relevant and effective.

We are fortunate to have a core of faithful supporters who keep the SPLC financially stable in uncertain times. While we continue building a broader financial base to expand the organization to meet growing demand for our services, conservative spending has kept the organization debt-free and on budget.

While the SPLC is adapting to serve today’s instant-publishing world, our role will always be as the “keeper of the flame” of the skills, values and ethics that make journalism uniquely valuable. Delivery platforms evolve, but verification, balance and responsibility never go out of style.

I believe in the SPLC because I know there will always be a hunger for well-told stories, and there will always be a need for trained researchers to separate truth from rumor. Young people are reinventing journalism in front of our eyes. The SPLC gives them the know-how to get into the crevices where secrets hide, and the confidence to take on tough subjects knowing that someone will always have their backs.

Reginald Stuart
Chairman of the Board
Student Press Law Center

The Society of Professional Journalists honored the SPLC’s Mike Hiestand as the 2012 recipient of its First Amendment Award. He joins a distinguished gallery of past winners that includes journalist Daniel Schorr and U.S. Supreme Court Justice William Brennan.
It’s tough being in a public records battle at a private school. But the SPLC’s support has given the Tan & Cardinal the confidence to continue our pursuit to make sure our campus is as informed as possible.

Lindsey Hobbs
Editor-in-chief, The Tan & Cardinal
Otterbein University
Winner, Betty Gage Holland Award for Public Records Reporting

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