

5 YEARS

STUDENT PRESS  
LAW CENTER

2024-2025  
ANNUAL REPORT



# Meeting this essential moment with hope and determination

The detention of Tufts University international student Rümeysa Öztürk this past March — simply for co-authoring an op-ed in a student newspaper — was a watershed moment. Journalist and podcast host Brian Reed called it “the most egregious attack on journalism” he’s seen in America, and Senator Edward J. Markey of Massachusetts said “it openly violated the most fundamental protections of our Constitution.”

Rümeysa’s story is not a singular one. Rather, it is one of thousands of **stories of this time** in which student journalists, writers and others have felt their voice silenced, challenged or threatened by those in positions of authority.

Their stories — and their First Amendment right to share them — drive our work at the Student Press Law Center.

For more than 50 years, we’ve been the nation’s only legal organization devoted exclusively to defending and advancing the free press rights of student journalists. In a time when journalism is under attack, we provide more than hope — we offer direct, expert help so students and their educators can navigate the law and stand up for press freedom.

In recent months, student editors nationwide reported to our Legal Hotline an unprecedented level of fear among sources, contributors and even staff. Many worried that speaking out or reporting on politically sensitive topics could invite retaliation.

Stories stalled. Sources went silent. But we had their backs.

Scores of editors and educators turned to the Student Press Law Center for urgent guidance as they navigated reporting on this critical moment while also trying to minimize harm to their writers and sources. While our team worked one-on-one with them, we also raised the alarm publicly — issuing a Student Media Alert to spotlight the chilling effect on student reporting. We



Executive Director Gary Green  
(Photo by Ryan Murphy)

published practical legal resources and hosted an off-the-record town hall to connect college editors with one another, ensuring strong and trusted peer groups were in place during times of uncertainty.

Again and again, SPLC was there — trusted, responsive and ready — helping students overcome obstacles in reporting and exercise their First Amendment rights.

Through it all, student journalists inspired us with their hope, resolve and determination for truth-telling.

Across the country, high school and college students continued to deliver powerful reporting that holds those in power accountable. Their investigations into wrongdoing led to the resignation of a university police chief and brought to light sexual harassment allegations against a prominent basketball coach. High school students’ reporting led to charges related to the “sextortion” of at least a dozen of their peers.

They are not only documenting issues on their campuses, but hundreds of student journalists are helping to fill critical gaps in local and statehouse news. That is why SPLC has partnered with the Center for Community News and others to ensure those covering local news are getting the training they need to produce strong journalism.

With attacks on press freedom intensifying, our mission doesn’t just matter. It’s essential. And as long as we’re here, no student journalist will ever need to face these threats alone. We stand ready for any new challenge: to protect student press freedom, defend student voices and foster effective and essential journalism.

Today’s student journalists are not the **next generation**. Here and now, they are part of this generation of truth-tellers. Together with your continued support, we intend to do **all we can, with all we have** to protect and preserve their ability to report the news, now and into the future.

**Gary Green**  
Executive Director

# Who We Are

The Student Press Law Center is the nation's only legal nonprofit devoted exclusively to defending and advancing the free press rights of student journalists.

**The stakes are high.** Student journalists are essential to democracy and community engagement. They fill critical gaps in local news by reporting stories that matter and holding the powerful accountable. However, student journalists are navigating an increasingly complex legal and political landscape, often without the protections or resources of professional newsrooms.

We equip students with the legal knowledge, tools and confidence to strengthen their reporting and stand up for their First Amendment rights. That's why we tell them, **"Write the story. We've got your back!"**

## LEGAL HELP

We provide student journalists and educators one-on-one support and legal expertise through our **free hotline, prepublication review** and **Attorney Referral Network**.

We **lead trainings, publish guides** and **offer tools** to help students understand and assert their First Amendment and newsgathering rights.

## TRAINING AND EDUCATION

## ADVOCACY

We advocate for stronger legal protections for student journalism, power the student-led **New Voices movement** and **mobilize support** when students' rights are under attack.

We **amplify student voices, raise the visibility of press freedom issues** and **build a community** of support that celebrates and protects student journalism.

## PUBLIC AWARENESS

# Steady, trusted leadership in the face of new free speech threats

An unprecedented threat required a bold response.

That's why, this April, the Student Press Law Center issued our first-ever [Student Media Alert](#) modifying decades-old guidance and laying out the newly hostile reporting environment in stark terms for editors and advisers.

We started hearing concerns from student journalists through our Legal Hotline as federal immigration raids and increased surveillance were ramping up. But it was the detention of Tufts University international student Rümeyşa Öztürk — for merely writing an op-ed in a student newspaper — that made the stakes unmistakably clear.

In student newsrooms, the chilling effect was immediate and severe. Editors received a flood of takedown requests from sources or contributors fearful that their past speech might now affect their safety. Sources were afraid to speak at all moving forward, even on mundane topics. Some student journalists stepped back from storytelling and reporting altogether.

Editors and educators turned to us for guidance.

As hotline requests spiked, we quickly convened a coalition of national student media organizations to provide public-facing resources for those grappling with threats to student speech. The Student Media Alert encouraged newsrooms to revisit policies around takedown requests and anonymous sourcing — something journalists have long avoided — particularly when immigration status could put students at legal risk.

As a result, [student editorial boards across the country](#) relied on SPLC's guidance as they made decisions to balance safety, ethics, legality and press freedom.

In moments of calm and crisis — including unprecedented periods like this — SPLC is a steady source of guidance and support. In addition to the Student Media Alert, we released a [legal FAQ](#), hosted an [expert webinar](#), [condemned Öztürk's arrest](#) and convened an off-the-record virtual town hall for college editors. All of these helped students navigate the evolving issue, report with confidence and build community to share notes and ask questions in real-time.



Recent government actions pose urgent threats to student speech.  
**Here's how student media can respond.**



Through all of it, SPLC was right there to help. Knowing SPLC had our back reminded us we weren't in it alone. We felt supported every step of the way. In moments like these, that kind of support means everything.

## CHRIS EVANS

*Director, Department of Student Media  
Rice University*

Through it all, we served as a steady source of guidance and support.

Our legal team continued to answer questions on the hotline, while serving as a go-to source for [national media](#) covering the story. Combining deep legal expertise, commitment to student press freedom and a track record of trusted support, we helped shape how student newsrooms and national media alike understood and responded to the evolving crisis.





# 42%

INCREASE IN INQUIRIES  
TO OUR HOTLINE  
FROM TWO YEARS AGO

**Student journalists' need for  
legal help continues to grow.  
We have their backs.**

# 1,067



HOTLINE INQUIRIES

# 48



STATES (PLUS D.C.)

# 93



STORIES VETTED

# “

I often tell students that no matter how courageous and conscientious we are, there are still questions facing this field that require more expertise than any student journalist or journalism adviser has in their toolkit. That's where SPLC's legal training and support comes in. You help us to identify the questions we need to ask so that we can be brave and responsible in challenging times.

**KATE PLOWS**

*Adviser, Strath Haven High School, Pennsylvania*

# Mobilizing a national coalition when press freedom is under attack

For 274 days after his arrest, criminal charges hung over Dilan Gohill, a freshman reporter for the *Stanford Daily*.

All for doing his job.

Gohill was arrested while covering a student protest at the university's president's office in June 2024. Wearing a press badge and holding a camera, Gohill was clearly there to cover the event, yet he was detained alongside demonstrators, spent 15 hours in custody and faced potential felony charges.

As shocking as the arrest was, the university's response made it worse. Instead of defending student press freedom, Stanford officials actively encouraged the Santa Clara County District Attorney to press charges. The message to student journalists was unmistakable — report at your own risk.

High-stakes situations like this reveal what it means to be a student journalist navigating an increasingly complex legal and political landscape, often without the protections or resources of professional newsrooms. That's why the Student Press Law Center exists: to provide critical tools and legal support to student journalists, especially when their rights are under attack.

Within days of Gohill's arrest, SPLC and our partners at the California-based First Amendment Coalition quickly mobilized a coalition of over two dozen press freedom organizations to advocate on Gohill's behalf. Together, we sent a letter urging the District Attorney's office to decline the charges. We applied public pressure and coordinated behind the scenes with Gohill's legal team.

For months, nothing happened. No decision from the county. No word from the university. Just silence — and a student journalist left to carry the weight of possible life-altering consequences for doing his job.

**The Student Press law Center knew silence wasn't an option.**

In January 2025, we wrote another letter, this time to Stanford's new president. Three days later, the university



Screenshot from ABC7 Bay Area



Those nine months [of not knowing] were some of the hardest of my life, especially with the uncertainty around my professional and academic future.... I don't think I would have made it through this process or have my case result in such a successful outcome if it weren't for the Student Press Law Center.

## DILAN GOHILL

finally confirmed to us that Stanford would not pursue disciplinary action — the first time Gohill himself learned of this decision. Finally in March, the district attorney's office announced they wouldn't pursue criminal charges.

Gohill went on to deliver a keynote address to hundreds of student journalists at the Associated Collegiate Press Spring Convention in March 2025, a moment of recognition and resilience SPLC was proud to help facilitate.

From day one to resolution, SPLC stood beside Gohill, with unwavering advocacy and coalition-building that turned his story into a national rallying cry for press freedom. This wasn't just about one student. It was about reminding institutions and the public: Student journalists are journalists, deserving of the same rights, protections and respect.



# Supporting courageous journalists when officials seek to silence them

In a dramatic and courageous stand for press freedom last fall, the staff of *The Mercury* at the University of Texas at Dallas went on strike following administrators' controversial firing of their editor. Now, with the support of the Student Press Law Center and our partners, they operate a new student newspaper, *The Retrograde*, completely independent of the university.

The ousting of Gregorio Olivares Gutierrez as editor in September 2024 followed months of rising tensions between student journalists and university leadership, sparked in part by *The Mercury's* coverage of how officials handled pro-Palestine protests on campus. Instead of supporting a free student press, administrators doubled down on their interference, culminating in Gutierrez's removal.

SPLC had been supporting the newspaper's staff long before conflict with the university reached a boiling point. For over a year, our team provided UT-Dallas student journalists with support through our Legal Hotline, including vetting their coverage for any potential legal concerns and coaching them through requests to access public records.

When UT-Dallas removed Gutierrez as editor under the pretense of bylaw violations, we mobilized with the Foundation for Individual Rights to Expression to [express our concern](#) over the university's interference in *The Mercury's* editorial independence. We also [reviewed the university's student media bylaws](#), which included vague and contradictory language that provided no legitimate



From left: University of Texas at Dallas's alternative student newspaper, *The Retrograde*, is staffed by distribution manager Lulu Cheng, human resource director Alexander Lawless, web editor Rainier Pederson, editor-in-chief Gregorio Olivares Gutierrez, managing editor Maria Shaikh and news editor Aimee Morgan. (Photo by Shelby Tauber for *The Texas Tribune*)



The Student Press Law Center is one of the most important resources available to student journalists.... *The Retrograde* only exists because of the early and crucial support we received from SPLC.

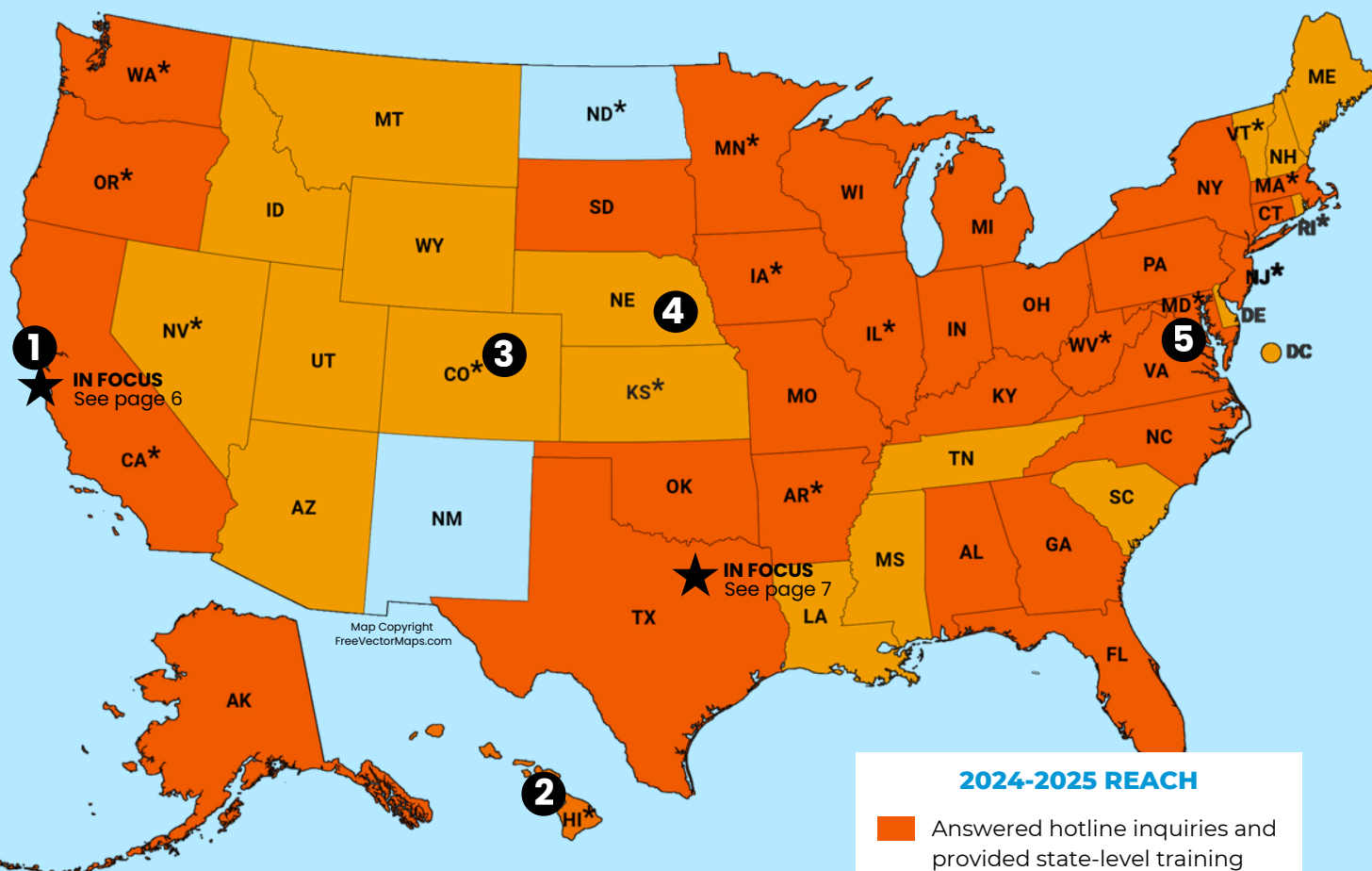
## GREGORIO OLIVARES GUTIERREZ

grounds to remove Gutierrez. After months of sustained pressure, the university began the process to develop new bylaws.

Between behind-the-scenes legal support and [public advocacy](#), SPLC supported UT-Dallas student journalists in defending their First

Amendment rights. With our legal guidance and expertise, we helped equip student journalists with the knowledge, tools and confidence to stand up to university administrators and launch their own newspaper — proving that student voices cannot be silenced.

# Growing national reach and impact



## The Student Press Law Center supports all student journalists — in all corners of the country.

That includes not only those involved in traditional student media, but also those in classes, internships and innovative news-academic partnerships. This school year, students and educators from at least **48 states plus D.C.** relied on our Legal Hotline or our trainings. Here are just a few examples.

### 1 Fighting indirect censorship

One common way to silence student journalists is to remove or reassign the teacher who trains and encourages them. That's seemingly what happened at Lowell High School in **California** this year, following an investigative story about students who claimed that teachers verbally harassed them. SPLC attorneys continue to work with student editors as they advocate for their adviser's return.

Meanwhile, the adviser has sued the school district based on the state's New Voices law, which prohibits retaliation against advisers for their students' speech. SPLC advocates for adding similar provisions to other New Voices laws so punished advisers have recourse.



## 2 Training educators

In addition to supporting New Voices advocates in passing new student press freedom legislation, the Student Press Law Center also works to educate stakeholders in the 18 states with existing laws. For example, this past year in **Hawaii**, we collaborated with the Department of Education on a series of four trainings to ensure educators and administrators throughout the islands understood and correctly applied the state's 2022 New Voices law. The trainings remain available for all to reference.

## 3 Defending students' local election coverage

At Grandview High School in **Colorado**, student journalists contacted the Student Press Law Center when administrators told them they couldn't cover their local congressional candidates. SPLC attorneys helped the students push back and resolve the issue, enabling them to move forward with their coverage.

As Jake Chau, high senior and editor-in-chief of Grandview TV, told The Nutgraf, "it reminded us — and hopefully [our administration] — that we are a legitimate press organization."



*Editors of the Theogony at Alexandria City High School*

## 5 Empowering students to protect their reporting before it's silenced

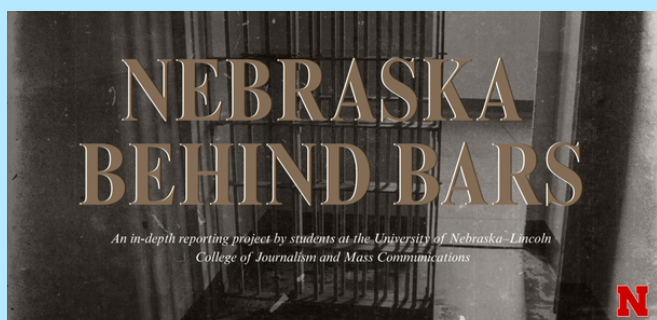
When student reporting on overcrowded and delayed buses — among other issues — sparked community attention and school officials' discomfort at Alexandria City High School in **Virginia**, the district decided administrators should start reviewing the students' content before it was published.

This kind of prior review opens the door to censorship — and it's exactly the kind of threat SPLC exists to confront.

When the students reached out, our attorneys guided them through the legal landscape and showed them how to push back directly at the district level. When the district developed an even more restrictive policy proposal, we gave them the tools to fight it, including our model policy. The students took that model and feedback from our staff to argue for the adoption of their own policy proposal before their school board.

Their advocacy and resilience are already making an impact, with the board delaying its vote on their original proposal to consider the students'. As James Libresco, outgoing co-editor of *Theogony* and one of the students leading the fight, told us:

**"SPLC was crucial in helping us advocate against censorship in our community. At first, we weren't confident that our situation was important, but they quickly helped us realize the stakes for ourselves and student journalists across the country."**



## 4 Vetting state investigations

In **Nebraska**, SPLC attorneys provided free legal review for a deeply reported investigation into multiple aspects of Nebraska's overcrowded and underfunded prison system. The series, which included seven long-form stories plus several multimedia components, was produced by students in an in-depth reporting class at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and published by news organizations throughout the state.



SPLC joined students and educators from across Pennsylvania in traveling to Harrisburg to meet with legislators and their staffers to discuss the state's New Voices bill.



Twenty-two high school students joined our **New Voices Student Leaders Institute**, learning how to tell their own stories and developing strategies to advocate for press freedom in their states.



New Voices Texas advocates Sarah Miller, Eliza Teo and Erick Garcia met with legislators in Austin to explain the importance of student press freedom.

## Expanding state law protections

**NEW VOICES**

guarantees  
student press freedom  
through state laws to

**10.5 million**

high school and  
college students in

**18 states**

and counting!

**New Voices** is a student-led, nonpartisan movement working to end censorship of student media by passing state laws that protect students' right to report freely. The Student Press Law Center powers this movement by convening coalitions, educating lawmakers, sharing model policies and equipping students with the training and confidence they need to stand up for press freedom. Learn more at [splc.org/new-voices](https://splc.org/new-voices).

In this 10th anniversary year of the modern **New Voices movement**, advocates across the country continued to build coalitions, win support and lay strong foundations for future advocacy.

Students from **Pennsylvania** and **Texas** traveled to their state capitals to speak with legislators about proposed bills. New Voices bills were also introduced in **Arizona, Connecticut, Kentucky, Missouri** and **New York**, with students working — with SPLC's backing — to build support. **Illinois** advocates also introduced a bill that would strengthen its New Voices law.

Since North Dakota kickstarted momentum in 2015, 11 more states have protected the voices of millions of high school and college students across the country. We will look to build on that progress in the months ahead.

Meanwhile, we also work to ensure that the existing 18 laws are followed — by leading training, by creating educational resources and by auditing school district policies for compliance.

For example, we partnered with West Virginia University this year to create an innovative internship-classroom experience for two students to learn the fundamentals of press law and audit compliance with the state's 2023 law. As a direct result, three districts passed policies protecting student press freedom. Emily Hughes Corio, director at WVU's Reed School of Media & Communications, told us:

**"By interning with SPLC, our students gain hands-on experience in understanding media law and student journalism advocacy. They are applying this work directly by educating other student journalists in West Virginia and through their own reporting. It is a perfect blend of education and advocacy for a great cause — student journalism."**



# Empowering a generation through evolving legal training and resources

The Student Press Law Center's trainings and legal resources equip student journalists to navigate the law, report with confidence and stand up for press freedom.

Delivered at conferences and online, as well as directly in classrooms and newsrooms, our training sessions reached **28% more attendees this school year than last.**

# 177



**TRAININGS & WORKSHOPS**

# 5,779



**TRAINING ATTENDEES**

# 233,487



**WEBSITE VISITORS**

Our legal experts and advocates offer practical, accessible guidance on everything from copyright and censorship to public records and protest coverage. As the landscape evolves, SPLC does too, developing new trainings and updating guides on issues like artificial intelligence and source confidentiality.

In every session, and with every leave-behind resource, students gain the tools they need to understand their First Amendment and newsgathering rights — and spark action for press freedom across the country.

Solomon Mellott was a senior at Summerville High School in South Carolina this spring when an SPLC training inspired him to take a stand by speaking to his local school board.



He said the training opened his eyes to what he and his peers could do to advocate for their rights.

**"After discovering the lack of any [student media] policy, I jumped on the chance to protect not just my publication, but the many that are budding throughout our district,"** he said. **"I and two other students took [SPLC staff attorney Jonathan Gaston Falk's] advice and lecture to heart, and ... attended our district board meeting, where I gave a speech requesting a new Student Media Policy."**



# Student Press Freedom Day sparks nationwide action, learning

"We are not backing down."

That's what *The Rider News* declared on **Student Press Freedom Day**, a national day of action the Student Press Law Center organizes each February and which took on renewed urgency this year.

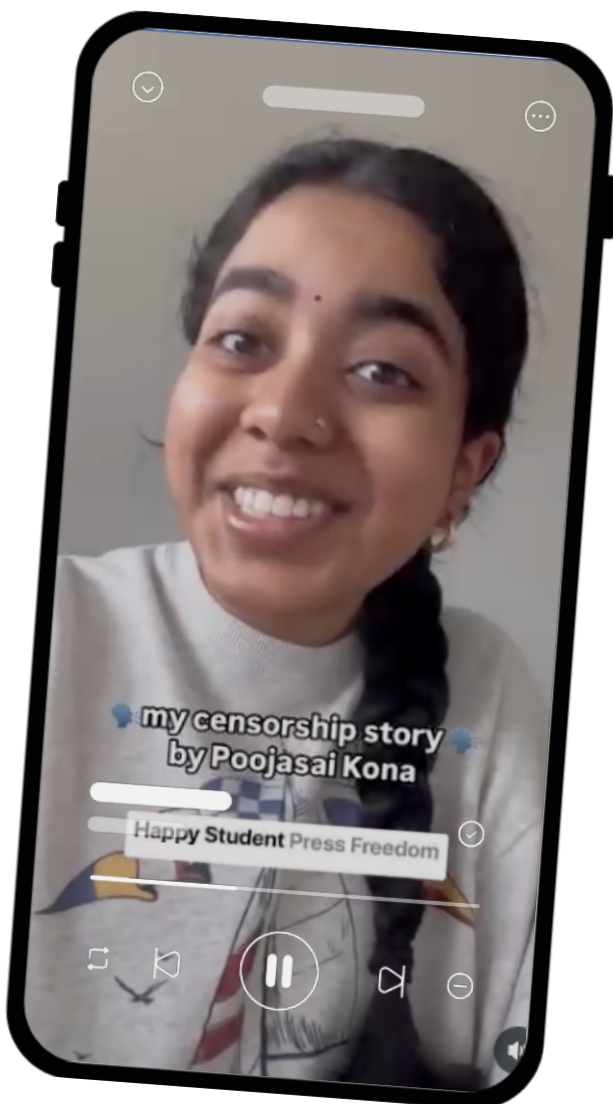
Students across the country showed up with conviction by hosting events, sharing their stories, engaging peers and advocating for their rights.

SPLC fueled their efforts with legal insights, toolkits and programming on everything from AI to the law. We spotlighted student voices and launched a partnership with Cathy Kuhlmeier — of *Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier* — to bring her into classrooms.

[Read more](#) about all the ways students took action this year.

Special thanks to the Day's sponsors: John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, E.W. Scripps School of Journalism at Ohio University, Davis Wright Tremaine, Journalism Education Association of Northern California, Poynter Institute, SNO Sites, University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications and University of Maryland Philip Merrill College of Journalism.

**Right:** Poojasai Kona, a junior at Frisco High School in Texas, [shared her censorship story](#) with PBS News Student Reporting Labs. She said other reporters typically don't cover issues important to students, which is why she advocates for New Voices. **"We as student journalists really just want to report the truth. We have stuff to say, and it's time for people to listen."**



The Daily Toreador editor-in-chief Marianna Souriall and her staff passed out shirts to Texas Tech students who correctly answered First Amendment trivia questions. (Photo by Jadon Chesnutt)



Staff of The All State at Austin Peay State University set up a table in the student center to talk with students about press freedom and the newspaper's role on campus. (Photo by Michael Dann)



Students in State College Area High School's journalism classes learned about their rights and then wrote postcards to Pennsylvania state legislators in support of New Voices legislation. (Photo by Saige Adair)



# 50 years of protecting student voices

Last fall, the Student Press Law Center kicked off a year-long celebration marking 50 years of empowering student journalists and advancing student press freedom.

The anniversary year began with a powerful reminder of SPLC's long-standing impact. During a conversation at *The New York Times* in October, columnist Nicholas Kristof reflected on how SPLC supported him as a high school journalist in 1976, when his school newspaper was censored and shut down.

**"It felt very lonely," Kristof said. "It was so helpful to have somebody at the other end of the line who knew about student press issues, and not only about the legal situation ... but also just to provide a certain amount of moral support...."**

In November, the celebration continued at the National High School Journalism Convention, where students and educators gathered for a special session featuring former SPLC executive directors Mark Goodman and Frank LoMonte. They shared stories, lessons learned and reflections on the organization's proudest victories over the decades.

As the anniversary year draws to a close this fall, we look forward to highlighting more stories from the past 50 years — and to continuing to inspire the next generation of student journalists to tell their own stories.

**A special thanks to our [SPLC at 50 Giving Society members](#) and our 50th anniversary sponsors:**



Freedom Forum  
American Press Institute  
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Pulitzer Prize-winning *New York Times* opinion columnist Nicholas Kristof, right, moderates a conversation with SPLC Senior Legal Counsel Mike Hiestand; Isabella Ramirez, editor-in-chief of the *Columbia Spectator*; and Charlotte Hampton, managing editor of *The Dartmouth* on Oct. 29, 2024, in New York. (Photo by Ryan Murphy)



SPLC supporters Rosalind and Andrew Stark and Thomas Eveslage at the New York event.



A 50th conversation at the National High School Journalism Convention in fall 2024.

“

I would encourage us to think about how we can collectively support ... student journalism as a way of supporting journalism writ large, because **fundamentally, student journalism is journalism.**

**NICK KRISTOF**

*Pulitzer Prize-winning  
New York Times  
opinion columnist*

# Thank you to our supporters

The Student Press Law Center gratefully acknowledges the generous support of the organizations and individuals who helped us defend and advance the free press rights of student journalists. Donors are critical for us to continue our work preparing the media leaders of tomorrow and ensuring students' voices are heard.

**This list represents those who gave \$250 or more between Jan. 1, 2024, and June 30, 2025, including those organizations who matched their employees' gifts to SPLC.** We would also like to thank the more than 375 supporters who contributed under \$250, many of whom have supported our work for years.

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SPLC doesn't just show up in moments of crisis, but rather they invest in long-term advocacy to help preserve the present and future of journalism.

### PRATIKA KATIYAR

*Donor, former student journalist  
 and New Voices advocate ([read her story](#))*

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## Student Press Law Center Legacy Society

We are also grateful to our legacy society donors who have pledged their support, allowing the Student Press Law Center to continue our fight for generations to come. To learn more about this society and view its members, visit [splc.org/legacy](https://splc.org/legacy).



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