

# This nonprofit is helping student journalists defend freedom of the press

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Students at Millard West High School in Omaha, Nebraska, hold up their student newspaper, which won a state award after overcoming censorship of a column that criticized teachers for bringing their own politics into the classroom. Photo from: Millard West Yearbook Staff via Washington Post

Certain newspapers and journalism organizations are getting more money than ever.

Recently, President Donald Trump has criticized newspapers and journalists. Journalists interview people and report on the news. The president says newspapers have been unfair in their stories about him.

Yet, many people think reporters are doing their job very well and they are giving more money to support journalism.

Still, some journalists are being overlooked: student journalists.

## "Public Defenders For Student Journalists"

There are more student journalists working at high schools and colleges than professionals who do journalism as a job.

The Student Press Law Center or SPLC works to help these young reporters.

Frank LoMonte leads the SPLC. He is a First Amendment lawyer, meaning he works on cases having to do with people's right to free speech.

Thousands of times a year, student journalists in trouble call the SPLC. They may have had a camera confiscated by police. Some requested public records and were denied. Others have had their writing changed or blocked by their schools.

"We're like the public defenders for student journalists," LoMonte said. They respond to every request, and never charge a fee.

## **Fighting Censorship**

LoMonte helped a reporter at the student newspaper at New Jersey's Kean University. She had tried to obtain a video from the university's police department. Once the reporter had the video, she wrote an important story about a former student. In 2013, the student claims the campus police arrested him with excessive, violent force. He says he was racially profiled, or targeted by police because of his skin color.

At an Omaha high school, the student newspaper wanted to publish an article. It said that teachers shouldn't talk about their views about government in the classroom. The article said that some teachers were speaking unfairly about President Donald Trump.

The school officials tried to stop the story from being published. Then, when students tried to write about censorship, the story was blocked, too. Then the SPLC got involved. After that, both pieces were published — and the students won a state high school journalism award.

## **Working With Limited Resources**

The group is meeting a critical need without spending much money, said Andy Alexander. He's worked for The Washington Post and now advises a group that protects journalists.

Student journalists often don't have the money or knowledge to fight back when they face opposition, Alexander says.

But LoMonte said the SPLC has helped students with many different problems.

"I've gotten people out of jail, I've gotten cameras back from police," said LoMonte.

The SPLC works in a rented office in northwest Washington, D.C. The four-member staff includes paid workers and law students. They can ask for help from 200 volunteer lawyers from all across the country.

Certain laws help professional journalists do their jobs, such as the Freedom of Information Act. This act requires that the national government hand over certain information they have. Student journalists can use this law, too.

But in school-censorship situations, LoMonte often does something different. He tells schools that it would be best for them to let students publish what they want. Students use social media, he tells the schools. They will find a way to get their message out in some other form, anyway.

## **Reporting Important Stories**

The center is also trying to pass laws that protect student journalists as they report the news.

The center gets donations, but it hasn't received much more than it has in the past.

Student journalists, said LoMonte, are doing really important work for society. They've tackled many key topics, including drug addiction and free speech at schools.

Now that college journalists publish articles online, they have a bigger audience than ever. However, this makes schools more afraid. They don't want big stories to come out and make them look bad.

That means more challenges to come. For LoMonte, the goal is still clear.

"If you're not defending student journalists," he said, "you're not defending journalists."

Quiz

- 1 Which of the following are two MAIN ideas of the article?
1. *Student journalists often find themselves in trouble because they do not know the laws.*
  2. *The SPLC needs more money or its operation will shut down.*
  3. *Student journalists do important work for society.*
  4. *The SPLC is an organization whose aim is to defend student journalists.*
- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 2 and 4
- (C) 1 and 3
- (D) 3 and 4
- 2 What is Frank LoMonte's MAIN goal?
- (A) to fight against censorship
- (B) to get the SPLC more money
- (C) to defend student journalists
- (D) to teach journalists about the law
- 3 Read the section "Reporting Important Stories."  
How do student journalists MOST help society?
- (A) They publish writing online.
- (B) They write about serious issues.
- (C) They help to pass laws.
- (D) They make schools afraid of news.
- 4 According to the article, which would be MOST helpful for the SPLC in the future?
- (A) having more and larger donations
- (B) working closely with President Trump
- (C) hiring more experienced lawyers
- (D) working only with high schools