

EDITORIAL

We need to close this chapter on book banning

If you need proof that the pen remains more threatening than the sword, consider that many Americans are more passionate about banning books than they are about endorsing safe gun laws.

They sometimes use words themselves to voice displeasure with titles on public shelves, though these days that commonly comes in the form of graceless threats made on social media.

Other battle lines are drawn through larger grassroots efforts. Rather than seeking to erase words, such enthusiasm would be better channeled into, say, community book clubs.

Banned Books Week arrives this week with the news that reported efforts to ban and restrict books are higher than ever. The American Library Association cited the highest figures in decades in 2021. Autumn just arrived and 2022 has already lapped its predecessor.

More troubling is that such efforts seem to be a backlash to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, pushing instead for Uniformity, Inequity and Exclusion. These aren't just a few books being targeted. The ALA documented challenges to 1,651 different titles in the first eight months of this year. Those are merely incidents collected through media reports.

Two of the titles that draw the most complaints are "Gender Queer," a graphic novel, and "Lawn Boy," narrated by a young gay man.

The high percentage of criticisms aimed at books with LGBTQ themes suggests America still has a lot of work to do regarding acceptance. It's something we need to talk about (after doing some reading first).

There are other notable pivots in the plot. Librarians are becoming targets. A public campaign launched in Idaho over "Gender Queer" resulted in a library director being harassed and accused of pedophilia. She finally resigned.

The library did not even carry the book.

This is stuff right out of "Nineteen Eighty-Four," a book which has its own history of being banned. But then, so were "A Farewell to Arms," "The Catcher in the Rye," "Brave New World" and "The Diary of Anne Frank." If all of these are too 20th century for you, consider the most banned titles of the 21st century, which have "Harry Potter" in the title.

This is not a problem happening somewhere else. "Gender Queer" is fueling a public debate in Greenwich after it was flagged by First Selectman Fred Camillo in an email blast that deemed it "disgusting." Camillo was careful to add that "I'm not for banning books," and Greenwich Library reported that it had not received a formal request to remove books in more than two decades.

Meanwhile, in Stamford, Ferguson Library Director Alice Knapp writes in an op-ed that "ugly complaints, including a few that were threatening" were made in response to a recent event in which storytellers dressed in drag to express lessons in tolerance.

For the authors, such complaints serve as a form of promotion, as libraries often defend their words through public readings, displays and writing contests. All are invitations to listen, to explore and to exchange ideas.

During Banned Books Week, it's worth pausing to consider what the world would be like without library shelves. Readers of all ages would be left to explore the internet, a library lacking guidance or context.

JACK CAVANAUGH

A Stamford veteran for the ages

For Stamford's Charlie Guinta, having participated in the fiercely fought World War II Battle of Iwo Jima in the South Pacific, wasn't enough; 77 years later he had to visit the site of an even bigger battle 10,000 miles away, the Allies D-Day invasion of Normandy, France, in June of 1944

"I thought about going for years and finally got to do it in April with two of my three sons and their wives," Guinta, 98, said recently while basking in the sun at Cummings Beach in Stamford. "Visiting Omaha and Utah beaches where the invasion took place and the cemetery where about 9,000 of those killed in the invasion was very emotional."



Charlie Guinta in the 1941 Stamford High School yearbook.

Little did Guinta know that he would be honored at the cemetery following a cruise on the River Seine from Paris to Rouen, the capital of the Region of Normandy. During the cruise, the cruise director asked if there were any World War II veterans among the 150 people aboard since they planned to place a wreath on the D-Day monument in the cemetery. When Guinta was the only one to raise his hand, the director asked him to lay the wreath. He agreed and did so when the group reached the cemetery.

"They treated my dad like he was a rock star," his son, Steven, said.

Pvt. Charlie Guinta and the 20,000 U.S. Marines and Army troops who landed on the volcanic island of Iwo Jima were far more important than rock stars. By the time the five-week battle was over — most of the American forces were told the battle would last about three days — more than 7,000 American marines (including five from Stamford), 719 Navy personnel and 41 Army troops (including one from Stamford) had been killed and about 20,000 others from the American invasion force had been wounded in one of the bloodiest battles of World War II.

Guinta was part of an Army signal corps battalion, which included 13 Stamford men, that installed telephone and other communication lines, which it did on Iwo Jima shortly after the Marines landed.

"There were still Japanese holed up in caves, and island still wasn't secure, but I didn't see much action," Guinta recalled.

Guinta and other members of his battalion had to sleep in caves and holes and were vulnerable to nighttime attacks by the Japanese.

Another Stamfordite who was with the second wave of Marines to land on Iwo Jima, David McKeithen, had harsh memories of Iwo Jima following the American invasion.

"After a while you began to live like a barbarian. You don't sleep that much and don't shave," McKeithen, who became one of Stamford's first Black police officers, was quoted as saying in Tony Pavia's riveting book "An American Town Goes To War" about Stamford WW II veterans' experiences. "Sometimes there were dead bodies all around you and it doesn't even affect you. At first you're scared, but after a while you get numb."

McKeithen, who joined the Army in 1940, a year before the United States entered the war, was eventually commissioned a second lieutenant but resigned the commission when he learned that as a Black officer he could not serve overseas where the fighting was going on.

Guinta spent 31 days on Iwo Jima and watched the historic raising by Marines of a U.S. flag on Mount Suribachi, where hundreds of Japanese forces were holed up. The unit shipped out in April for the American-held island of Saipan, where Guinta and the rest of his unit were to prepare for an invasion of Japan. While they were en route, the Japanese surrendered, ending World War II.

The war had ended, but they had to remain on Saipan for five months because American military personnel were heading home by ship.

"I did nothing special except serve my country," Guinta said. "Many military did a lot more than I did and saw more action and paid the ultimate price." They included three members of his Signal Corps battalion, along with the six men from Stamford.



Contributed photo

Alice Maret-Guelph pins a medal on Stamford resident Charlie Guinta at the Normandy Cemetery for his service during World War II.

Returning to Stamford in February 1946, Guinta was reunited with his high school sweetheart Jane Larson and they were married Feb. 15, 1946 at St. Maurice Church in Stamford. Eager to begin a business career, Guinta studied accounting and other business courses at Pace University in Rye, N.Y., after which he began a 40-year relationship with Waldenbooks in Stamford, rising from accountant to vice president and chief financial officer by the time he retired in 1990. During the beginning of that period, Guinta found time to pursue a passion for sports writing by covering baseball and football games for the Advocate, as he had done while he was sports editor of the Stamford High School paper, the Siren.

"Even though I didn't get paid, I loved doing it even when the teams were playing out of town," he said. In some ways, he was joining his father, Sandy, who was a linotype operator for the Advocate for 40 years, and his brother, also named Sandy, who spent 55 years as a compositor in the Advocate press room.

His father was deaf and mute, while his mother could talk but not hear, so Charlie learned sign language at age 6 and served as a translator between them and his younger brothers in their Glenbrook home.

Guinta looks much younger than his 98 years (he'll be 99 in December). Among other organizations, he's been a member of the Board of Directors of Ferguson Library, Junior Achievement and the United Way. In recognition of his civic achievements, Guinta was named Citizen of the Year in 1992 and Man of the Year by the venerable State Street Debating Society. For 11 years he also coached his sons and their teams in Stamford's Little League. Guinta played tennis at the Italian Center, the Newfield Club and elsewhere until a hip injury cut short his tennis career when he was in his early 90s. Looking for a new aerobic sport, he found one in swimming. Since taking swimming lessons at the Tully Center seven years ago, Guinta can be seen in the Tully pool three or four times a week, doing eight laps of the breast stroke, a commendable distance for swimmers half his age.

Proving anew that there's no slowing Charlie Guinta down ("I don't want to get old" is his frequent refrain) he plans to fly to London alone in mid-April, and board the Cunard Line ship the Queen Mary April 30 in New York for a seven-night voyage to Southampton.

"I'm taking this cruise because the Glenn Miller Orchestra will be playing every night, The band became famous during World War II and I've always loved it," he said, reminiscing about seeing the original band play at Glen Island Casino in New Rochelle, N.Y., in 1941. "I was there with my girlfriend Jane to dance and listen to the band and have loved it ever since."

He fell in love with Jane, too. Charlie Guinta, a veteran for the ages and a Stamford treasure.

Jack Cavanaugh is a Stamford native and resident. He is a longtime journalist whose last newspaper stop was as a sportswriter and feature writer at The New York Times. He previously had been a news reporter for ABC News and CBS News, Reuters, UPI, the New Haven Register and the Providence Journal. He is the author of six books and taught at Fairfield University and the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism.

ALICE KNAPP

Calls for book bans put our freedom to read on the line

The rising number of challenges to books at public libraries across the country is gravely troubling.

Libraries play a crucial role in our democracy. Our job is to collect material and provide programming that reflects our communities but also represents diverse viewpoints. Intellectual freedom is the cornerstone of a democracy and it is essential that multiple views be represented.

In its "State of America's Libraries Special Report," The American Library Association noted an increase in the number of attempts to ban books at public, academic and school libraries. The targeted books were mainly by authors who were Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC) or LGBTQ+ or the subject matter reflected those topics. One Michigan community recently voted to defund the library due to its LGBTQ collection.

This is happening close to home too. Here in Connecticut there have been several cases of censorship at libraries. In Feb-

ruary 2022, the Connecticut Library Association recognized this growing problem and published a strong statement against censorship, which said in part, "We oppose the restriction, removal, banning, and censorship of books and other library materials that limit the freedom to read, speak, publish, or obstruct intellectual freedom."

Challenges facing public libraries have grown in the wake of the Supreme Court decision overturning overturned Roe v. Wade. After Oklahoma passed a restrictive abortion law that mirrored Texas' abortion ban, the executive director of the Metropolitan Library System in Oklahoma City felt it was necessary to contact legal counsel to understand what front-line librarians could (or could not answer) if someone asked for information on abortion. Their legal counsel determined that librarians could give factual information on scientific research, information about state and national laws and court cases. But this has made the library community

profoundly uneasy.

In South Carolina, state lawmakers proposed legislation that would have made it a crime to provide information over the internet or phone about how to obtain an abortion. The bill failed but this type of chilling legislation could have an impact on First Amendment-protected speech and librarians' ability to provide accurate health-related information in other states too. The American Library Association, in a strongly worded statement, reminded us that library patrons have the right under the U.S. Constitution to "seek information free from observation or unwanted surveillance by the government or other third parties."

The Ferguson Library has received complaints about books or programs over the years, including our Drag Storytime. During this program, storytellers, dressed in drag, inspire a love of reading while teaching lessons on diversity, inclusion, tolerance, self-love, and self-expression. It is a

wonderful event and public libraries provide an inclusive and safe place for such messaging. Last Saturday as part of MakeFest, we hosted another successful Drag Storytime with our partner, Stamford Pride. Unfortunately, we received numerous ugly complaints, including a few that were threatening.

This is Banned Books Week, where we celebrate books that have been challenged. What can you do? Thank your librarians and teachers. They are on the front-line defending intellectual freedom — your right to obtain information and read whatever you want. Read a challenged book! We have lists of them and can help you choose. Talk to your local and national politicians. Let them know the importance of intellectual freedom and that you care about this fundamental issue.

Alice Knapp is president of Stamford's Ferguson Library.