

Testimony Against HB 322 and HB 327

September 22, 2021

Dear Members of the State and Local Government Committee. Thank you for allowing me to share testimony today. My name is Joan Spoerl and I reside in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. I am a former teacher, an early childhood educator and parent of a high school junior.

Ignorance breeds ignorance and because ignorance is not bliss, I urge you to vote “no” on Sub HB 327 and HB 322. These bills violate free speech rights, censor unnecessarily and disrespect the family stories of vast numbers of Ohio children and Ohio’s own history.

I wonder if perhaps you grew up as I did in a very homogeneous community? I will share how an admittedly narrow perspective widened and why I wish that for all citizens. These experiences opened my heart and mind to history and present-day circumstances – both good and bad.

I graduated from high school in 1981 in a virtually all-white inner-ring suburb of Milwaukee. In school, I learned little, if anything, about Reconstruction, post-Reconstruction and the Civil Rights movement. My family watched the television series Roots together and I learned enough from this to be open to learning more later. Though my family didn’t talk about race and I never heard racist remarks, I absorbed many of the wrong messages and a few of the right messages from the media I digested.

I made many assumptions that have since been challenged and upended by living and working in integrated environments and bringing an open heart and mind with me wherever I go. Thank goodness. My life is the richer for it.

One experience that opened my heart, mind and eyes was my own family’s deep involvement in promoting peace and reconciliation between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland through the Ulster Project (such as the one that was implemented in Massillon, Ohio). Through that work, we saw how biases and misinformation, perpetuated for centuries, caused unnecessary division and strife. We saw how when people get to know one another, one on one, biases break down, the truth is revealed and healing occurs.

Indeed my ignorance about racism in our country deprived me of a learning opportunity I now wish I could get back. It’s embarrassing for me to share this but I’m proud to say I’ve committed to learning much since then and I keep learning more every year. When I was in college at the University of Chicago, my friend invited me to dinner with his father who was visiting from out of town. If I’d known more about history, I’d have known that I was dining with one of the Little Rock Nine. Only after that dinner did I learn what the Little Rock Nine was. Only later did I learn that my friend’s father wasn’t allowed to drink out of the same drinking fountains as white people or to stay in the same hotels or dine in the same restaurants when he was growing up. I didn’t know about Jim Crow laws, Rosa Parks or Ruby Bridges. I barely knew about Martin Luther King, Jr. I learned a bit about the Holocaust in high school and was duly horrified but too much information was neglected and that’s a shame.

You may choose to be willfully ignorant but you have no right or place to choose ignorance for the children of Ohio. In fact, you’re obligated to educate them well so they can be healthy, productive citizens committed to the maintenance and uplifting of our democratic republic and justice for all.

Legislation that makes the job of educating our children harder, rather than easier, is wrong-headed and wrong-hearted. It's completely non-sensical.

Why not value truth? Why not develop the ability to confront painful truths? This county's story, this country's history is full of important lessons learned, of biases broken down, of individuals and groups overcoming incredible prejudice and hardship to make us the world leader we are in so many realms. Think American pop culture. Think jazz. Think peanut butter. Think moon landings. Think Satchel Paige. Think LeBron James. Think. Think. Think. If others have been able to persist despite so many obstacles, why can't you find the strength and resilience to open your hearts and minds to learn, grow and think critically?

Why not also find inspiration as I do in our constant march away from our mistakes and towards progress? Why not celebrate this nation's ability to advance and improve, inspired by the aspirational ideals of our human, thus flawed, founding fathers? Why not keep righting the wrongs and fixing the mistakes? Why go backwards? Why not want to be the best we can be?

Why not celebrate resilience in the face of unspeakable horror and injustice? We've made progress in that most of us are now truly horrified by the thought of crowds of people cheering and jeering at a lynching. We've made progress in that most of us are truly horrified by the thought of supposedly mature adults jeering at black children entering a school building with white children. Let's keep progressing. There are many wrongs we have yet to right. Why not embrace the challenge together to uplift all?

In the words of poet Amanda Gorman:

"Somehow, we've weathered and witnessed

A nation that isn't broken, but simply unfinished."

And that's okay. Let's commit to finishing it well. In trying to ban divisive content, you can't erase history or current events. This isn't how to heal division.

In the 1990s, at a concert at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, I learned about the origins of tap dancing. Do you know it? If you google it, you'll be able to find an article from the University of Michigan that states: "Tap dance originated in the United States in the early 19th century at the crossroads of African and Irish American dance forms. When slave owners took away traditional African percussion instruments, slaves turned to percussive dancing to express themselves and retain their cultural identities. These styles of dance connected with clog dancing from the British Isles, creating a unique form of movement and rhythm." Isn't that something? Isn't that worth knowing? Isn't that interesting? Do you know the history of the banjo? Look up the Smithsonian's explanation. When I learned these things, I shared them in developmentally appropriate ways with my kindergarten students. That was the right thing to do.

Only a few years ago I learned from Richard Rothstein's work that it wasn't just "white flight" that caused so much segregation but also governmental policies that ensured segregation.

In 2019, I learned about Rosenwald Schools when visiting Huntsville, Alabama when my son was at Space Camp. They shouldn't have been necessary but it's an interesting story. Do you know it?

In recent years, many in Cleveland have learned together about ACEs or Adverse Childhood Experiences as documented in critically important research about a largely white demographic. That has resulted in acknowledgement that a child's experience of racism is itself an ACE and can negatively impact their health outcomes in adulthood. Many reluctantly came to acknowledge that racism was at play in high black infant mortality rates. In so many ways, we all pay the price for our society's failure to act on these lessons. Conversely, we'd all reap so many benefits if we worked together to address them.

I learned so much from reading Evicted by Matthew Desmond a few years ago – as much as I ever did in the public policy courses I took in college. Have you read it?

And oh my, have you seen or heard of the movie Hidden Figures? That was an important story that needed telling – both upsetting and truly inspiring.

Have you read Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston?

Have you seen the episode of Finding Your Roots when Henry Louis Gates tells Cory Booker about his ancestry? Interesting indeed.

I could go on and on and on with my learnings. Please don't deprive Ohio's children as I was deprived. Please allow them to be enriched by the full story of our humanity and to evolve into the well-informed, thoughtful, critical thinkers and strong citizens that we need. Don't be afraid of controversy. Don't be afraid of discomfort. Learn and grow so you can make smart policies that uplift all Ohioans.