

'I can't believe a newspaper writer doesn't support freedom of speech'

Letter to the Editor:

Senior sociology student Walker Thomas wrote this letter in response to Alicia Adcox's article "Funeral protests insult families," that ran in issue 7 of *The Blue Banner* on March 16. We only edited it for grammar.

I can't believe a letter like this needs to be written. But, when I was flipping through the *Blue Banner* this week I came across the editorial titled, "Funeral protests insult families" about the Westboro Baptist Church, their ignorant protests and the "limits" of freedom of speech. Just the first line of the piece, "Some aspects of freedom of speech should not be so free anymore" was cause for major concern. I'm saddened anyone, let alone someone who

writes for a newspaper, could both not value free speech and could misunderstand what the concept of freedom of speech entails.

How did this come about? Fred Phelps and his Westboro Baptist Church have been staging protests for years at funerals, sports events, plays and anywhere else where they can get attention. Their signs are stupid and hateful: "God hates fags," "Thank God for 9/11," "God: USA's Terrorist" (sic), and the like. At this point, most people seem familiar with the Phelps clan and their message and the legal system has offered responses. Several states, including Michigan, Indiana and Illinois, created laws that required protests at funerals take place some distance (between 300 and 500 feet depending on the state) from the

front of the church and/or cemetery. In 2006, the federal government got involved, passing the "Respect For America's Fallen Heroes Act," which makes protests within 300 feet of cemeteries during the service and an hour before and after illegal. Phelps and his clan aren't accused of breaking this law. Typically, they are very careful to be within the letter of the law. They don't threaten people directly (that would be illegal) and follow state laws about how close they can be. In *Snyder v. Phelps*, the Supreme Court case that was just decided, Westboro isn't accused of breaking these laws, only of causing psychological distress and inflicting pain on the family of the dead soldier.

In this case the Supreme Court corrected a lower court mistake and came down firmly

on the side of freedom. Simply put, freedom of speech means the ability to contribute whatever you want to the public discourse so long as logical safety measures are in place. The issue here isn't safety, as stated above; Phelps, etc. aren't at these events to get into fights, they just want to spread their stupid, hateful message. In fact, the *Blue Banner* article concedes this point from the title. "Funeral protests" according to the author don't threaten safety but rather, "insult families." Essentially, The *Blue Banner* author is claiming that people who someone finds insulting shouldn't be able to contribute to public debate. The *Blue Banner* editorial claims that, "someone needs to call bull on this (*Snyder v. Phelps*) ruling." What we actually need to call bullshit on is the idea that there exists a right to not

be offended.

For every Voltaire satire or Martin Luther King Jr. speech we read in Humanities we must remember that the full range of opinions contains not only these canonized and beautiful thoughts but also crude and disturbing (to us) thoughts as well. The supposed benefit of a liberal arts education, like the one the author of this editorial and I are paying for, is the ability to make the judgement as to which opinion falls in which camp. We empower ourselves to make this discussion because allowing someone (one assumes editors of *The Blue Banner*) else to do so violates the very idea of a free society and is insulting (to use the editorial's phrase) in the most profound and basic sense of the word. The author of that editorial seems to want a world in which only "appropriate"

and "tasteful" thoughts are allowed to be uttered; again, not trusting us to make this choice, but instead empowering some outside force to protect us from dangerous ideas. If you want to actually believe in ideas like freedom of speech and democracy, you must allow people who don't share your opinions to speak. They don't get their right to speak because you deem their ideas "acceptable" they get this right by being a citizen and human. It will get ugly. People will say things you find deplorable and hurtful, but if you don't believe in freedom of speech for people you deeply disagree with, then you don't believe in it at all. If it's policed speech it isn't free speech, and I'll put the value of free speech over the value of nobody being offended any day.

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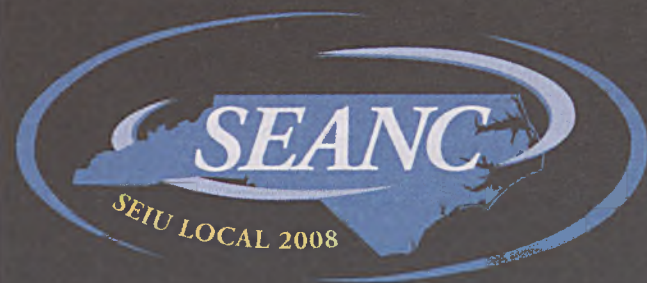
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Contact Heather

Your SEANC Western Region Member Action Coordinator
E-mail: hwelborn@seanc.org Phone: 828-310-6204

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