

**Max Schlenker**  
**North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics**

### **Defending North Carolina Students' Right to Read**

I have been an avid reader since I was old enough to hold a book, and my passion for literature and language has only grown with every passing year. Once I reached high school, I knew I wanted to share my love of reading with others, so throughout my sophomore year of high school, I served as a student representative on the Media Advisory Committee at my school. During our meeting in October of 2013, we received some startling news. A mother of a 10th grade student had filed a complaint against one of the novels that was going to be read in her son's English II Honors class. She explained that the book, Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, contained "graphic material" that she felt was not appropriate for high school sophomores. Unfortunately, school procedure dictates that once a challenge is officially filed, the book has to be removed from the curriculum until the Media Advisory Committee votes on whether it is inappropriate, so it was taken out of the classroom.

Isabel Allende's novel *The House of the Spirits* follows three generations of an aristocratic family living in Chile during the Chilean Revolution in 1973. The novel has won dozens of international awards and is considered by critics to be a masterpiece in magical realism; the book also brings to light a social and political struggle that much of the modern world is unfamiliar with. *The House of the Spirits* does contain adult material, but it is addressed respectfully, and is used to express to the reader the struggles that Chilean people faced under their oppressive government. The goal for sophomore English classes under the new Common Core curriculum is to study world literature, so *The House of the Spirits* certainly deserved its place in the classroom.

Once the news came out that the book was being challenged, every copy was checked out of the library in less than a week. Students began reading it outside of class and it quickly

became a divisive topic within the student body and larger community, producing thoughtful and respectful discussions about censorship in education.

The Media Advisory Committee voted unanimously to retain the book, but the parent appealed the decision, and strengthened her campaign against *The House of the Spirits*, speaking at local events and on television. By this time the new semester had started, and it was now my turn to take English II Honors. While I was extremely disappointed that students were denied *The House of the Spirits* first semester, I was even more determined to have the book back in the classroom now that the decision affected my education.

I worked with other students, parents, the English department, and our librarians to start a local "Students' Right to Read" campaign to bring together students, faculty, and community members who supported keeping *The House of the Spirits* in our school. Events were held all over the community and at Appalachian State University to discuss the contents of the novel. Our Right to Read group organized a "read-in" at school with over two dozen students reading the novel together around the library before and after school. We created t-shirts and fliers encouraging everyone to speak out against censorship.

The decision was appealed multiple times until it arrived in the hands of the Board of Education, whose decision would be final. In the weeks before the decision, multiple community members contacted the American Civil Liberties Union about the challenge. The ACLU organized a press conference at Appalachian State University. I was honored to speak as the student representative among guest speakers that included the NC Poet Laureate Joseph Bathanti. The event concluded with a video from Isabel Allende herself expressing her concern this issue was taking place in the United States. After the press conference, the Board of Education made their final decision, and voted to keep the book in English II Honors, where my classmates and I were able to read and fully appreciate the book with the help of our amazing teacher.

My entire experience defending *The House of the Spirits* and fighting censorship taught me that the world is such an immensely larger place than we imagine, and that literature is one of the most precious insights into this world that we have. Books like *The House of the Spirits* teach us about people, places, and events that we never knew existed, and forces us to think critically about the world from a larger perspective. Modern society focuses on telling children and adolescents what they should and should not be reading, listening to, or watching, but libraries allow people to explore the outside world from a safe place, and to learn without fear of judgment. Education is a powerful tool, and libraries encourage students to immerse themselves in information and push themselves to the very edge of modern knowledge. Libraries create leaders who can think independently and understand the importance of education for all people.

The number of book challenges in the state of North Carolina has risen in recent years, so it is more important than ever for students of all ages to be advocates for freedom of speech in libraries and schools. Libraries must remain a safe place for all people to enjoy, and the responsibility falls on fellow students to defend our right to read and to protect our own education. Supporting school and public libraries across the state will only foster more advocates for the importance of free learning and each individual's personal pursuit of knowledge. Libraries allow us to dream knowing that the only obstacle standing in our way is deciding which book to pick up next.