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-via email only-

Board of Trustees
Traverse Area District Library
610 Woodmere Avenue
Traverse City, Michigan 49686
trustees@tadl.org

Re: Book Challenge to *Grandad's Pride*

Dear Board of Trustees:

It has come to our attention that at an upcoming board meeting you will be reviewing a request by one or more members of the public to restrict access to a book called *Grandad's Pride* which is currently located in the youth section of the library. *Grandad's Pride*, a highly acclaimed book for youth published in 2023 by award-winning children's author and illustrator Harry Woodgate, has been on the shortlist for multiple awards and was honored with the Book Award for Best Children's Literature on Aging by the Gerontological Society of America.¹ American jurisprudence and long-held principles of librarianship squarely reject the notion that access to children's literature may be restricted in a public library based on moral disapproval by some patrons regarding the content of the book or viewpoint of its author. Doing so here would be an act of censorship that violates the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. We therefore urge you to reject the book challenge and continue to allow unrestricted access to the literature and information that your community relies on you to provide.

Restricting access to books is a form of censorship.

Requesting that titles be moved to a different part of the library is a recent trend that is being used to make the ultimate goal of impeding access to these materials seem more reasonable. The requester often reasons that they are not asking that the book be removed, rather, they are "just" asking that it be moved to a different section of the library, or behind the circulation desk. This has the effect of making any opposition seem irrational, as the act of moving the book is not as severe as banning the book. But actions other than banning materials can constitute censorship. Censorship is "an amalgamation of practices, including the redaction of text in a document, cutting pages out of a book, or denying access to materials."² It also includes "a change in the

¹ *Grandad's Pride*, Harry Woodgate, www.harrywoodgate.com/grandadspride (last visited March 13, 2025).

² Knox, Emily, "The Books Will Still Be in the Library": Narrow Definitions of Censorship in the Discourse of Challengers, 62 *Library Trends* 740 (Spring 2014).

access status of material, based on the content of the work and made by a governing authority or its representatives. Such changes include exclusion, restriction, removal, or age-grade-level access limitations.”³

The American Library Association, which is the oldest and largest library association in the world, and the Michigan Library Association, which is the oldest and largest library association in Michigan, both oppose book challenges or other restrictions on the access to titles.⁴ The American Library Association explains that book challenges “do not simply involve people expressing their point of view, but rather are an attempt to remove materials from curricula or libraries, thereby curtailing the ability of others to access information, views, ideas, expressions, and stories. ... Any reduction in access to library materials based on an individual or group’s belief that they are harmful or offensive is an act of censorship.”⁵ Its council adopted a statement opposing the use of prejudicial labeling systems and restrictions, and affirmed its support of “the rights of individuals to form their own opinions about resources they choose to read, view, listen to, or otherwise access.”⁶ Similarly, the Michigan Library Association’s Board of Directors adopted a statement that defined intellectual freedom as a library user’s right “to read, seek information, and speak freely as guaranteed by the First Amendment,” and “a basic right in our democratic society.”⁷ The Michigan Library Association went on to express that everyone has a right to “receive and impart information and ideas,” and oppose “any restrictions to access which may include ... challenges to literature.”⁸

Limiting access to material based its content violates the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.

The library associations’ conclusions find support in cases that have analyzed restrictions on access to reading material under First Amendment principles. For example, a federal court in Texas struck down a resolution that allowed a certain number of library patrons to petition the library to move books from the children’s section into the adult section. *Sund v. City of Wichita Falls, Tex.*, 121 F.Supp.2d 530 (N.D. Texas, 2000). In reaching this conclusion, the Court noted

³ *Challenge Support*, American Library Association, <https://www.ala.org/tools/challengesupport> (last updated 2022, last visited March 13, 2025).

⁴ *About ALA*, American Library Association, [https://www.ala.org/aboutala/about-ala/home#:~:text=The%20American%20Library%20Association%20\(ALA,Equity%2C%20Diversity%2C%20and%20Inclusion](https://www.ala.org/aboutala/about-ala/home#:~:text=The%20American%20Library%20Association%20(ALA,Equity%2C%20Diversity%2C%20and%20Inclusion). (last visited March 13, 2025); *About MLA*, Michigan Library Association, <https://www.milibraries.org/about-mla> (last visited March 13, 2025).

⁵ *Book Ban Data*, American Library Association, <https://www.ala.org/bbooks/book-ban-data#:~:text=Challenges%20do%20not%20simply%20involve,materials%20to%20be%20a%20ban>. (last visited March 13, 2025).

⁶ *Labeling Systems: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights*, American Library Association, (adopted on June 30, 2015), <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretation/labeling-systems#:~:text=The%20prejudicial%20label%20is%20used,%2C%202015%2C%20by%20ALA%20Council>.

⁷ *Statement of Principle – Intellectual Freedom*, Michigan Library Association (Sept. 10, 2021), <https://www.milibraries.org/intellectual-freedom#:~:text=Libraries%20are%20vital%20repositories%20of,that%20infringe%20on%20informed%20choice>.

⁸ *Id.*

that “[t]he First Amendment to the United States Constitution . . . indisputably protect[s] the right to receive information,” and that this right is “vigorously enforced in the context of a public library.” *Id.* at 547. It held that the resolution placed a “significant burden” on this right, because neither people searching for the relocated titles nor people browsing the children’s section of the library would be able to find the titles that had been moved. *Id.* at 550. The Court also held that it was unconstitutional to permit “vocal minorities veto power over any children’s book with which they disagree” based on their own reaction to it. *Id.* at 534; 549. Regulations that confer this type of censorship power are known as creating a “heckler’s veto.” The Court in *Sund* noted that the Supreme Court has repeatedly invalidated such regulations “as antithetical to core First Amendment values. *Id.* at 549.

Another court held that requiring a student to obtain a signed permission slip from her parents before checking out certain titles burdened her First Amendment rights, noting that “the right to read a book is an aspect of the right to receive information and ideas, an ‘inherent corollary of the rights of free speech and press that are explicitly guaranteed by the Constitution.’” *Counts v. Cedarville School Dist.*, 295 F.Supp.2d 996, 998-999 (W.D. Ark. 2003), citing *Board of Education v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853, 867 (1982). The Court in *Counts* also found that “the stigmatizing effect of having to have parental permission to check out a book constitute[d] a restriction on access,” as was the student’s inability to simply go into the library, take the book off the shelf, and thumb through it. *Counts* at 1002.

Here, allowing *Grandad’s Pride* to be placed behind the circulation desk would have the same effect. People looking for that specific title would not be able to find it, and people browsing in the children’s library would also not come across it. Patrons would not be able to pick up the book and thumb through it, and there would be a stigma attached to a title that was placed behind the circulation desk. All of these things have been recognized as burdens on the First Amendment rights of library patrons. Similar to the cases above, these burdens would be caused by one person who decided that the content in the book offended them, and that it should thus not be available to anyone else.

The Court in both *Sund* and *Counts* also rejected arguments that no First Amendment rights were implicated because the books in question were not removed from the library. In *Sund*, the Court noted that “[a]lthough . . . petitioned books are not banned entirely from the library, the burdens on Plaintiffs’ First Amendment rights imposed by the Resolution are nonetheless constitutionally objectionable.” *Sund* at 549. In *Counts*, the fact that the student had other access to the restricted books did not prevent the Court from striking down the restriction. It noted that “[t]he Supreme Court has held that ‘one is not to have the exercise of his liberty of expression in appropriate places abridged on the plea that it may be exercised in some other place.’” *Counts* at 1000, citing *Reno v. American Civil Liberties Union*, 521 U.S. 844, 880 (1997). It has long been observed that “the possibility the Government could have imposed more draconian limitations on speech never has justified a lesser abridgement. Indeed, such an argument almost always is available; few . . . First Amendment cases involve outright bans on speech.” *Denver Area Educ. Telecom. Consortium, Inc. v. FCC*, 518 U.S. 727, 809 (1996) (Kennedy, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part). The fact that *Grandad’s Pride* would still be physically in the library does not change the First Amendment implications of restricting access to it.

Restricting access to titles runs contrary to the library’s stated missions.

The 2021-2024 strategic plan for the Traverse Area District Library identifies diversity and open access in furtherance of its vision to be “a forward-thinking and responsive hub that connects, supports, and strengthens our community.”⁹ The plan explains that the goal for diversity is “to offer a wide variety of resources, programs, and services that meet the needs of all segments of our community.”¹⁰ To promote open access, the library aims “to provide equitable access to all and provide a place where people feel welcome and respected.”¹¹ A key strategic priority was to create an inclusive space where people can “have more access to diverse materials, programs, and service.”¹²

Grandad’s Pride aligns well with these priorities. The book is about a child who finds her grandfather’s Pride flag in his attic, and has an idea to bring his community to him to celebrate Pride when he insists that he is too old to do so.¹³ It has been on the shortlist for multiple awards and was honored with the Book Award for Best Children’s Literature on Aging by the Gerontological Society of America.¹⁴ The grandfather character in the book explains that “Pride is like a giant party where we celebrate the wonderful diversity of our communities and demand that everyone should be treated with equality and respect – no matter who they love and what gender they are.”¹⁵

It is our understanding that the person or persons challenging this book object to a portion of the illustration on that page, which shows a person wearing leather clothing that the challenger believes could be perceived as “bondage wear.”¹⁶ The publisher has defended this depiction, noting that *Grandad’s Pride* is meant to teach children about healthy relationships and the LGBTQ+ community, and that it “faithfully depicts Pride parades from the past and present, many of which are attended by children.”¹⁷ But this may be exactly what makes titles such as *Grandad’s Pride* vulnerable to attack. In 2024, books challenged in libraries across the United

⁹ Traverse Area District Library 2021-2024 Strategic Plan, Traverse Area District Library at 9, (June 2021) https://www.tadl.org/sites/default/files/content/minutes/TADL_SPlan_2021_2024.pdf.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.* at 10.

¹³ *Grandad’s Pride*, Harry Woodgate, www.harrywoodgate.com/grandadspride (last visited March 13, 2025).

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Harry Woodgate, *Grandad’s Pride*, pp5-6 (2023).

¹⁶ Board of Trustees Regular Meeting Minutes, Traverse Area District Library, Jan. 16, 2025, p. 3.

¹⁷ Kevin Shoesmith, *Grandad’s Pride publisher defends kids’ book showing man in leathers*, BBC (Aug. 24, 2023), <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-humber-66607475>.

States reached the highest level ever documented.¹⁸ Data shows that this harmful trend disproportionately affects people of color and LGBTQ+ people, as 36% of the books banned in the last school year featured characters of color and 25% included LGBTQ characters or people.¹⁹ As a result, LGBTQ+ people and people of color do not see their lives reflected in the library's offerings, and they feel the stigma attached to their stories. Not only does this run contrary to the Traverse Area District Library's stated vision, it also causes real harm to already marginalized groups of people.

Conclusion

Restricting access to titles, even when the titles remain in the library, is an act of censorship. Doing so impedes the rights of library patrons and runs afoul of the First Amendment. It can also harm marginalized communities who may come to places like public libraries hoping for an inclusive space. We urge you to reject the challenge against *Granddad's Pride*, and to please consider the principles above when confronted with similar challenges.



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¹⁸ Jo Yurcaba, *More than half of books banned last year featured LGBTQ characters or people of color, report finds*, NBC News (Feb. 27, 2025), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/banned-books-lgbtq-transgender-black-people-of-color-pen-america-rcna193879>.

¹⁹ *Id.*