

# ACLU

FOR PASSIONATE GUARDIANS OF CIVIL LIBERTIES

## magazine



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16

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**Anjali Nair** is a designer and art director in Brooklyn. Her work has been recognized by *American Illustration* and the Society of Typographic Arts, among others.

## 10

**Schools on the Front Line**

Teachers and students have joined the ACLU to fight back against attacks on academic freedom.

By Shayla Love

## 16

**The New Activism**

Today's activists are reinventing the resistance and combating the worst of President Trump's offenses through local action.

By Wudan Yan

## 24

**Defending Immigrants' Rights**

The ACLU is waging—and winning—the latest battle to protect legal rights and due process for immigrant communities and beyond.

By the ACLU

Cover illustration by Anjali Nair

**02 In Brief**

Executive Director Anthony D. Romero on President Trump's second term.

**03 Letters to the Editor**

Readers from around the country respond to articles in the magazine.

## FRONT LINE

**04 Priorities**

The ACLU is defending free speech against a hostile administration.

**06 Case Study**

ACLU Legal Director Cecillia Wang on the Alien Enemies Act.

**07 Know Your Rights**

Here's how you can talk to friends and neighbors about their rights.

**08 Friend of the Court**

ACLU President Deborah N. Archer discusses her new book, *Dividing Lines*.

**09 National Report**

With Firewall for Freedom, the ACLU is mobilizing a state-based resistance.

## COMMUNITY

**30 Trans Rights**

The ACLU unveiled an art installation in D.C. dedicated to trans joy.

**32 In Good Company**

A new ACLU initiative is rallying creative leaders to defend our rights.

**33 Free Forum**

Artist Amir Khadar illustrates the strength of the Black trans community.

**34 Activist Spotlight**

Ignacio Acevedo is empowering undocumented communities.

**35 My Take**

Kenneth Roth of Human Rights Watch on battling abusive governments.

**36 ACLU Moment**

The ACLU's seminal "Scopes Monkey Trial" case turns 100 this year.

34



**T**his issue of *ACLU Magazine* marks a significant and serious moment in our country's history. The Trump administration has made its intentions unmistakably clear. It is consolidating power by any means necessary, and we have only one choice: to step up and fight. Our system of checks and balances is strong. Even stronger are the millions of voices—people like you—who are pushing back and saying, “Not on my watch.”

At press time, the ACLU has filed 127 legal actions, including more than 60 lawsuits, and has challenged many of President Trump's executive orders. We are currently on pace to exceed in a matter of months the number of lawsuits filed during Trump's entire first term. We are ready, and we will not slow down.

The courts have largely held firm in stopping the president's overreach. The ACLU has filed multiple lawsuits to block the administration's misuse of the Alien Enemies Act to deport hundreds of people without due process. We sued to stop unlawful transfers to Guantánamo. We defended those who were illegally detained and threatened with deportation for their political speech. And we blocked the administration's threat to cut federal funding unless schools abandoned inclusive education.

**“We will never  
stop fighting for  
our rights  
and liberties.”**

Recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions have been more troubling. In June, the court went out of its way to express disapproval of “universal” injunctions in a set of cases challenging the Trump administration's effort to undo birthright citizenship. The court also let stand a Texas law that restricts access to First Amendment-protected content in *Free Speech Coalition v. Paxton*. In addition, it upheld a discriminatory Tennessee law banning gender-affirming care for transgender youth in *L.W. v. Skremetti*. This is a painful setback, but the court's narrow decision left open other avenues to continue the fight for transgender people's safety and dignity.

These rulings underline how important it is that all of us push back beyond the courtroom. As you'll read in this issue, the ACLU is mobilizing thousands to act as a firewall against the administration's abusive agenda. In “The New Activism” (p. 16), we showcase how a community of local activists and volunteers has deepened and evolved since President Trump's first term. “Schools on the Front Line” (p. 10) highlights educators who are determined to protect undocumented students from deportation and uphold academic freedom. And “Defending Immigrants' Rights” (p. 24) breaks down how fundamental rights—including due process, asylum, and free speech—are being stripped from immigrant communities.

These are difficult days, but the ACLU's community of activists, lawyers, and supporters has always been a beacon in challenging times. When the Trump administration goes after people's rights and freedoms, it first has to go through all of us. Together, we must make it clear that we will never stop fighting for our rights and liberties.



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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



**The Spring 2025 issue of ACLU Magazine highlights next gen activism.**

### Re: "Generation Activist"

I just finished reading the Spring 2025 issue of *ACLU Magazine*. Once again, I was struck by the beautiful profile photographs of activists. Each photo is inspiring, showing the inner strength of the person or group and their courage as they speak out against injustice. Their faces shine a light for me in this difficult moment in history.

*Rose K. Murphy  
Watsonville, Calif.*

I am an older Black man who has seen quite a bit of [the country's] turmoil and struggles. It was comforting to read about the success of the ACLU's National Advocacy Institute... and its network of young advocates. Our future leaders, along with the 1965 trailblazer Mary Beth Tinker, are just some of the many reasons I continue to support the ACLU.

*Carlton Smith  
Malden, Mass.*

After reading your spring issue about the courage of the young people who are standing up for their legal rights, I am realizing yet again the importance of the work of the ACLU. I am a longtime contributor and am moved to make a second contribution in two months to the ACLU of Northern California. Your work is of especially critical importance at this crucial time.

*Meredith Stout  
Berkeley, Calif.*

I loved this issue! So wonderful to read about the work you are doing cultivating the next generation of activists, and I truly enjoyed the personal stories shared by members of

the trans community in "Freedom to Be."

*Meg Oliver  
Baltimore*

### Re: "Taking Pride in Who We Are"

What a travesty that Larissa Hubbard's photo was not allowed in her yearbook and a crime that her mother paid for an ad from which Larissa's photo was deleted. Her photo doesn't belong in a little ole yearbook anyway: Such a gorgeous one belongs on the cover of a national magazine! We need to keep moving forward to make schools safe and welcoming places.

*Dottie Engle  
30-year public school teacher  
Middletown, Md.*

### Truth to Power

Thank you for all the work you do, including lawsuits, pursuit of the truth, and the dissemination of the same. We look to you to "fight the good fight" with all your dedication and might. It appears that you are all we have left between losing our country and saving it.

*Jim Cranston, CDR/USN (Ret.)  
North Port, Fla.*

What a comfort to know that our ACLU is there to powerfully challenge the unlawful and unconstitutional actions of a president on a rampage. From slashing funding for vital services to attempting to erase transgender individuals and so much more, his actions are abhorrent, and he must not be permitted to succeed. I know that the ACLU will be there every step of the way.

*Oren Spiegler  
Peters Township, Pa.*

### Back issues

**online:** Visit our website to see previous issues of *ACLU Magazine* in PDF format: **aclu.org/publications**

**We love your feedback!** Let us know what you think about this issue: **ACLUmagazine@aclu.org**



In March, protesters in New York City demanded the release of Mahmoud Khalil, a Columbia University graduate student who was detained for political speech.



# FRONT LINE



## PRIORITIES

### Dissent Is Patriotic

The ACLU is defending First Amendment protections against a hostile administration.

**In his first months back** in office, President Trump has waged a multifront war on free speech. Despite issuing an executive order on his first day purportedly “restoring free speech,” his actions have consistently stifled protest and dissent.

“We have not seen in my lifetime an administration or a president with such consistent, pervasive hostility toward the First Amendment,” says Ben Wizner, director of the ACLU’s Speech, Privacy, and Technology Project. “[He] has at every turn tried to shut down any power center in society that might hold him in check.”

The administration’s attacks take aim at multiple institutions. They include arresting and detaining

MICHAEL NIGRO/SIPA USA VIA AP IMAGES



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

students for protected political speech, extorting law firms, and threatening to punish educators. All point toward a systematic dismantling of organizations and silencing of individuals who have the power to push back against the administration's authoritarian impulses.

When Columbia University graduate student and permanent resident Mahmoud Khalil was unlawfully detained by ICE in March because of his political speech, the ACLU quickly joined his legal team—which includes Dratel & Lewis, the Center for Constitutional Rights, CLEAR, Van Der Hout LLP, Washington Square Legal Services, and the New York Civil Liberties Union—to seek his release. What followed was a rapid defense of other international students and scholars, including Tufts University PhD student Rümeyza Öztürk, Georgetown University professor Dr. Badar Khan Suri, and Columbia student Mohsen Mahdawi, who were arrested and threatened with deportation because of their political speech or affiliation. In each case, the ACLU and its partners successfully blocked their removal from the country while litigation proceeds.

The ACLU has also challenged multiple executive orders attacking law firms that have represented clients or brought litigation that the president dislikes. In May, a district court judge struck down President Trump's order attacking law firm Perkins Coie for its past voting rights litigation. "This win sends a vital message—the Trump administration's thugery can be defeated by people of courage and integrity," notes Brian Hauss, senior staff attorney for the ACLU's Speech, Privacy, and Technology Project. By targeting prominent lawyers, the administration is attacking the right to representation and hopes to silence opposition through fear. These executive orders are part of a larger effort to knock out the pillars of a free society—speech, media, civil society, universities, and the rule of law.

This kind of government repression does not just impact activists, students, and lawyers, it attacks us all. Dissent and academic freedom are essential to a functioning republic, and diversity of opinion benefits everyone. The courts have blocked most of the president's worst violations, and the ACLU, with the support of partners and advocates, continues to fight for robust free speech protections. The country's freedom and security depend on a vigorous defense of this foundational principle. —JAY A. FERNANDEZ



**TAKE ACTION** Learn more about how you can protect free speech at [aclu.org/freespeech](https://aclu.org/freespeech).



## Thwarting Overreach

ACLU Legal Director Cecillia Wang discusses the Alien Enemies Act and how the courts are holding firm against President Trump's unlawful actions.

**In March**, President Trump invoked the Alien Enemies Act of 1798—a wartime law—to justify the targeting, detention, and deportation of Venezuelan immigrants. The ACLU and Democracy Forward sued the administration the same day.

"It's entirely unlawful for President Trump to try to invoke the magic words of 'national emergency' and 'invasion' in order to deport people to a gulag in a foreign country, without due process," says ACLU Legal Director Cecillia Wang.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARISSA LESHNOV





The ACLU has filed separate cases challenging the use of the Alien Enemies Act and has prevailed in courts around the country, including in Washington, D.C., New York, Texas, and Colorado, and before the U.S. Supreme Court.

“The Alien Enemies Act litigation is a bellwether for how all of our litigation against the Trump administration is doing,” says Wang. “And the news is good: The majority of courts are doing what they are constitutionally committed to do, which is to

**ACLU Legal Director Cecillia Wang, pictured here near her office in downtown San Francisco.**

serve as a check on unlawful executive power.”

While these wins are promising, Wang is clear-eyed about our country’s system of checks and balances, which she notes is working “for now.” “We won’t win every stage of every case,” she says, “but we must fight for individual liberties, due process, and the rule of law.”

If there is a silver lining to the Trump administrations, Wang believes it may be the opportunity to reflect on a long history of presidential overreach under the guise of national security.

“Our whole system of checks and balances is premised on the notion that presidents will act in good faith, and Trump explodes that presumption,” says Wang. “All of us are being made painfully aware of the faults in that system, which gives presidents entirely too much leeway to use the invocation of national emergency in order to trample individual freedom.”

Though Wang leads the organization’s legal department, she emphasizes that litigation is just one tool in the ACLU’s multipronged approach to advocacy. That versatility, coupled with the power of the American public, is reason for hope even in dark times.

“All of us have the power to join together, to raise our voices, to bear witness, and to make our views known,” says Wang. “There’s a lot of work to be done to stop President Trump and to repair the damage. But at the ACLU and around the country, we have what it takes to not only survive this but to thrive and rebuild our country in the vision that we want, with equality, due process, and freedom.”

—REBECCA MCCRAY

## KNOW YOUR RIGHTS



### Talking to People About Their Rights

Activists across the country are speaking truth to power and taking action. Knowing your rights is central to that effort. But what are your rights when talking to friends and neighbors about *their* rights? Here’s how you can safely talk to others about their rights.

- You have the right to tell people about their legal rights. Explaining to other people what their rights are does not violate the law.
- You have the right to inform people of their legal rights even when the person has broken or is breaking a law.
- You can suggest questions that people can ask law enforcement to determine whether they are under arrest.
- You have the right to share truthful, lawfully obtained information about law enforcement activity.
- You can also advocate for changes to laws without fear, as long as you’re not directly inciting or aiding and abetting illegal activity.

**i LEARN MORE** Brush up on your rights at [aclu.org/kyr](https://aclu.org/kyr).

# Dividing Lines

The ACLU's president discusses how transportation and the architecture of a community reinforce racial inequality.

ACLU President **Deborah N. Archer** is a leading expert in civil rights, civil liberties, and racial justice and is an award-winning teacher and legal scholar. Her new book, *Dividing Lines: How Transportation Infrastructure Reinforces Racial Inequality*, was published in April. We sat down with Deborah to talk about the book, how the ACLU confronts systemic injustice, and more.

—REBECCA MCCRAY

**Q:**

**You're an associate dean and professor at NYU's School of Law and you also direct the school's Community Equity Initiative. What are the major themes of your work?**

A lot of my research and advocacy focuses on inequality at the intersection of race and space, and the ways that we have deprived communities of color of the resources and

support they need to be healthy, thriving, and resilient.

**How does thinking about "race and space" inform your work as a civil rights lawyer and an author?**

If we expand our understanding of government-sponsored segregation beyond racial covenants and redlining, it's clear that it's not just those invisible lines that perpetuate oppression and inequality—it's also the physical, literal lines [including highways] that run through our communities. We often ignore those lines because they're part of the architecture of a community, but they're also part of the architecture of racial inequality.

***Dividing Lines* is focused on transportation. How does transportation connect to the ACLU's work?**

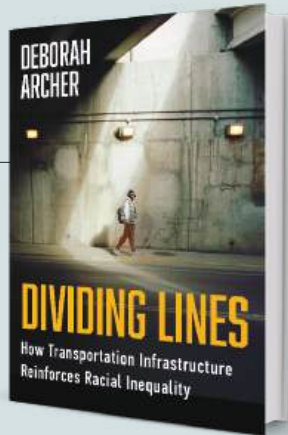
Transportation determines who gets to feel like they belong. It determines who enjoys access to all the opportunities and resources that the country provides. It decides who gets to live with safety and dignity. Those are all things that are critical to our work at the ACLU.

We're trying to ensure that when the Constitution says "We the People" it really means all of us. To do that work, we have to think about segregation and inequality and injustice in our communities, and how we have built and perpetuated that. Transportation is essential to



QUINN RUSSELL BROWN





that conversation and essential to everything that we fight for and value.

**How are you thinking about the ACLU's litigation under an administration that seems to believe the rules don't apply to it?**

The moment now shows that we can't just focus on legal tools to build equity, because those who oppose racial justice are not just focused on legal tools either. Securing civil rights was always dependent on far more than just having beautiful, powerful language embedded in our laws. The ACLU's model of integrated advocacy means that our work is going to be more impactful and more durable. We're using litigation, but we're also using narrative change and doing broader advocacy work. We're working to help build power in communities, and all of these pieces working together have always resulted in deeper impact.

**i LEARN MORE** Visit [aclu.org/dividinglines](https://aclu.org/dividinglines) to see more about *Dividing Lines*. Any royalties from purchases made through the ACLU store will be donated to the ACLU.

# Firewall for Freedom

To fight the Trump administration, the ACLU is mobilizing a state-based resistance.

**State and local officials** play vital roles in safeguarding our civil rights and civil liberties. Since last fall, the ACLU, with its network of affiliates nationwide, has worked closely with those officials—including governors, attorneys general, state lawmakers, and mayors—to enact protective policies that serve as firewalls against the Trump administration's attacks on our rights. This effort has resulted in wins across the country for immigrants' rights, reproductive freedom, voting rights, privacy, and more.

**Alabama:** Following the ACLU of Alabama's advocacy for reproductive health-related legislation, state lawmakers passed the Alabama Maternal Health Care Act, expediting Medicaid coverage. The passage of this bill means that uninsured pregnant people can get the health care they need early in their first trimester, improving outcomes for both parent and child.

**Virginia:** With public support from the ACLU of Virginia, Governor Glenn Youngkin signed an updated Virginia Consumer Protection Act into law, which will now prohibit the collection, disclosure, sale, or dissemination of consumers' reproductive or sexual health information without consent.

**North Carolina:** State lawmakers introduced the Don't Tread on Me Act, an effort to enshrine a new Individual Freedom Bill of Rights that protects private medical information and prevents warrantless surveillance, tracking, and data collection. The ACLU of North Carolina worked closely with the bill's primary sponsors to draft the language.

**New Mexico:** Governor Lujan Grisham signed into law SB 36, prohibiting the disclosure of personal data from driver's licenses for federal immigration enforcement. This follows a public campaign led by the ACLU of New Mexico and a coalition of immigrants' rights organizations.

**Wisconsin:** The Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors passed a resolution opposing ICE action at the county courthouse and calling on local law enforcement to uphold everyone's right to due process. Amanda Merkwae, the ACLU of Wisconsin's advocacy director, spoke out in favor of the resolution, stating that "courts can't operate fairly or effectively when people don't feel safe coming forward."

**TAKE ACTION** Join our fight for freedom in your state. Visit [aclu.org/volunteer](https://aclu.org/volunteer).

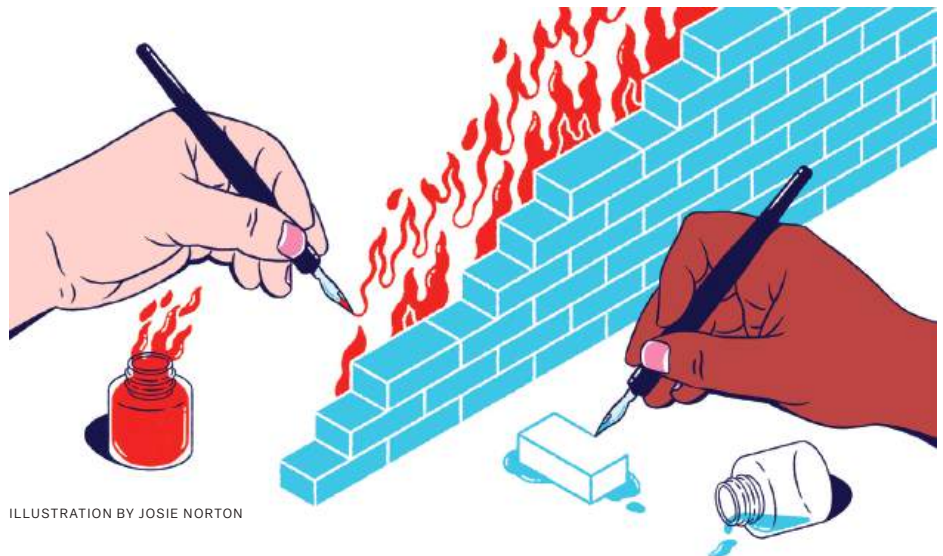


ILLUSTRATION BY JOSIE NORTON







# SCHOOLS ON THE FRONT LINE

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**Many of the Trump administration's worst assaults on civil rights and civil liberties are happening in schools nationwide. Teachers and students have joined the ACLU to fight back.**

**BY SHAYLA LOVE**  
ILLUSTRATIONS BY TATYANA ALANIS

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In the early-morning hours of March 27, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents raided a dairy farm in Sackets Harbor, a small town in northwestern New York. Though the agents claimed to be looking for a man charged with trafficking, they instead entered, without a warrant, the home of a mother who lived and worked on the farm. The agents handcuffed her, along with her three children, ages 9, 15, and 18, and took them away.

Approximately 1,300 people live in Sackets Harbor, on the shores of Lake Ontario. At the center of town is Sackets Harbor Central School, a stately brick building for kindergarten through 12th grade. Jaime Cook, the school's principal, had known the children taken by the agents for three years. When she heard about the raid, she imagined the students' desks sitting empty that school day and their friends wondering where they had gone.

Cook says the mother and her children (who have not been named for their own protection) had done everything right when it came to their immigration status: They had gone to all their necessary court hearings and declared themselves to immigration judges. Their only mistake was living in a house on the same road as a home that had a warrant issued. This kind of detainment is called collateral detention, where a warrant for one person is used to detain other, nearby undocumented people. "The fact that ICE went door to door is unfathomable," Cook wrote in an open letter she posted on Facebook. "When I think of my third grader's experience, my stomach twists and it is hard to breathe."

Since January 2025, President Donald Trump has issued a dizzying number of executive orders, including one of dozens on immigration that increased nationwide sweeps by ICE. The whole country has been impacted, but schools are finding themselves on the front line, as orders affect students whom educators are dedicated to teaching and protecting. Many of the critical assaults against civil rights and civil liberties are taking place in schools like Sackets Harbor Central School. And from protesting deportations to battling censorship, teachers and students alike are fighting back.

Cook and the children's other teachers immediately worked to find out where they had been taken, searching the records of detention facilities all over the country. Cook was stunned to learn that they had been taken out of state, to Karnes County Immigration Processing Center, a privately operated ICE facility in Texas.

"No one—let alone a mother with three children—should ever have to experience ICE agents busting down your door, ripping you from home, and sending you thousands of miles away to a detention facility," says New York Civil Liberties Union Senior Education Strategist Mabel Tso. "It's a level of inhumanity and cruelty that sends shockwaves."

When Cook learned how far away they had been taken, she was devastated. "That was when all bets were off," she says. "We were going to cry out with as much noise as possible."

In early April, the New York Civil Liberties Union joined the community for a large protest to demand the family's release. "When people see the real, human impact of ICE's cruelty and Trump's mass deportation machine," says Tso, "they mobilize, speak out, and fight back. At the rally, I saw teachers, families, organizers, and residents marching together, chanting: 'Bring this family back home to our community, where they belong.'"

When students from the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA), a federal public school system connected to military bases, saw books being removed from libraries and pictures of Martin Luther King Jr. being taken down from their walls, they knew they had to push back.

DoDEA is a civilian subagency that is federally run rather than under state and local control. There are 161 DoDEA schools in 11 countries, seven states, Guam, and Puerto Rico, serving about 67,000 students. Officially, Pete Hegseth, the U.S. Secretary of Defense, is their superintendent. In January 2025, three of President Trump's executive orders demanded that a wide swath of books and curricula in broad categories like gender and racial justice be removed from schools.

Days after the executive order, Hegseth issued a memo stating that there would be no more Black History Month, Women's History Month, and National Hispanic Heritage Month. He ordered schools to clean out libraries and remove anything from the curriculum related to gender or any "divisive" concepts. "Immediately we saw dozens, if not hundreds, of titles pulled from the shelves," says Emerson Sykes, senior staff attorney with the ACLU's Speech, Privacy, and Technology Project. Students who were in the middle of projects were told they could no longer work on them. Alongside Martin Luther King Jr., images of Frida Kahlo and Malala Yousafzai were taken down.

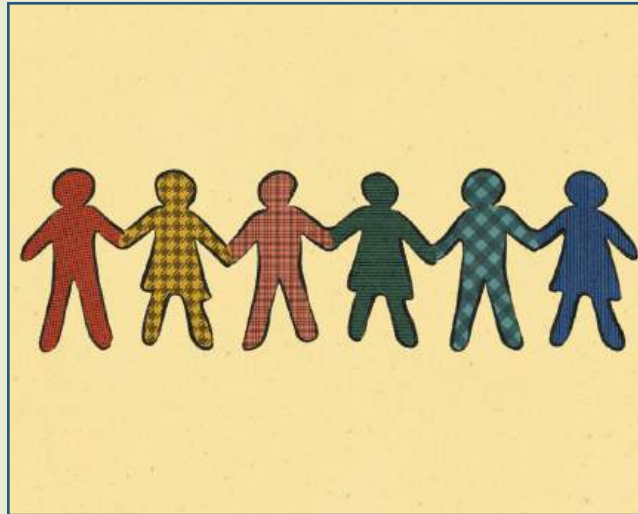
Some of the books that have been banned are *Freckleface Strawberry* by Julianne Moore, a children's book about a child learning to love their freckles, and *No Truth Without Ruth*, an illustrated biography of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee and *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury, a novel about book-burning and censorship, were also on the chopping block. In a DoDEA high school library in Europe, the book *The Kite Runner*, about Afghanistan under Soviet and Taliban rule, was pulled. And even U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, a book about working-class white Americans, was removed.





**“TEACHERS HAVE BEEN AN INVALUABLE  
RESOURCE AND ALLY.”**

**—EMERSON SYKES, SENIOR STAFF ATTORNEY  
WITH THE ACLU’S SPEECH, PRIVACY, & TECHNOLOGY PROJECT**



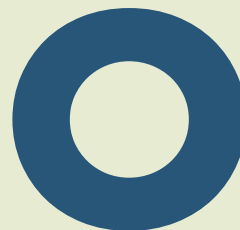
Teachers were told they couldn't teach the gender identity chapter to students preparing for their AP Psychology exam. "They were prohibited from learning an entire chapter that they would later be tested on," Sykes says. A health curriculum for middle schoolers was also shut down; it included topics like mental health and sexual hygiene.

Students at DoDEA schools immediately staged walkouts in response to the removals, and now 12 students in DoDEA schools have filed a lawsuit arguing that the executive orders violate their First Amendment rights. The suit represents students from six families on four bases in Virginia, Kentucky, Italy, and Japan. They range from prekindergarten to 11th grade. "I have three daughters, and they, like all children, deserve access to books that both mirror their own life experiences and that act as windows that expose them to greater diversity," Natalie Tolley, a plaintiff on behalf of her three children in DoDEA schools, told the ACLU. The complaint was filed on April 15, and the ACLU has asked that the court block the law while the case proceeds.

The teachers have been an invaluable resource and ally, Sykes says. The Federal Education Association and the National Education Association (NEA), which represent educators, contributed an amicus brief, and teachers have helped

to gather information about what removals were taking place in schools. "They care deeply about the quality of these students' education, and they understand how terrible the decision is to try to remove these materials for no good reason," Sykes says.

Also, DoDEA schools can be seen as canaries in the coal mine—a warning of what's to come in public schools around the country, as changes can be implemented in the federally run schools more quickly. "This is the vision that this administration has for public education," Sykes says.



orders that impact schools more broadly have, in fact, already been issued. In February, the Department of Education sent out a "Dear Colleague" letter warning that the administration would revoke federal funding from any school that partook in "illegal" diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work.

The letter was forceful, yet vague: It did not define what "illegal" meant, but threatened that any undefined DEI practices would be determined unlawful and that teachers had to



## “WE’RE CONSTANTLY STRIVING TO KEEP ALL OF OUR STUDENTS FREE FROM FEAR.”

—JAIME COOK, PRINCIPAL  
AT SACKETS HARBOR CENTRAL SCHOOL

immediately revise their lessons. If they did not, they would be investigated and potentially lose their funding. The general language meant that educators at public schools and universities worried that they could be penalized for teaching any of their standard lesson plans.

Jordan,\* an AP English teacher, shared with the ACLU that he often helps students prep for their AP exams by connecting the themes of older books to current events and students’ daily lives. He was concerned that talking about sexism or racism in these conversations could now be punished. “I fear they are losing valuable analytical training and preparation for college if they cannot generate their own opinions on challenging works from our past and connect them to their world today,” he said. Taylor,\* an assistant professor whose research focuses on Indigenous narratives, told the ACLU that the letter encompassed the entire scope of her work. “As long as the letter is effective, I cannot fully perform my role as an educator and speak freely on these critical topics,” she said.

The ACLU, as well as the ACLU of New Hampshire, the ACLU of Massachusetts, and lawyers for the National Education Association, sued on behalf of NEA’s approximately 3 million educators. The lawsuit also acknowledged how the letter causes harm to NEA, NEA-NH, and the Center for Black Educator Development. In the complaint, teachers shared how the letter impacted their ability to teach. One New Hampshire high school teacher often teaches books that bring up discussions around race and gender, and he’s worried he could be accused of discrimination. An eighth-grade social studies teacher who covers United States history from the Civil War to the present worried that teaching about certain moments in American history could be interpreted as violating the letter’s prohibitions related to “systemic and structural racism.”

In March, the ACLU’s motion asked the court to block the policy while the case proceeded. In April, the ACLU was successful: A judge granted the request for a preliminary injunction blocking the letter. Sharif El-Mekki, CEO and founder of the Center for Black Educator Development, said the decision was “a critical step toward protecting the freedom to teach and the freedom to learn.”

Americans should expect schools to continue to be on the front line. “Public education has always been used as a battleground for how we want to think about, talk about, and educate ourselves as a society,” Sykes says. Teachers, students, and their communities are rising to the occasion.

In Sackets Harbor, Jonna St. Croix, head of the Sackets Harbor Teachers Association, helped to organize the protest to demand the release of the detained children and their mother, drawing around a thousand people and gaining national attention. Tom Homan, Trump’s “Border Czar,” has a house in Sackets Harbor, and the protesters marched past his home. The demonstration got the attention of New York Governor Kathy Hochul, who said in early April that she could not think of “any public safety justification for ICE agents to rip an innocent family, including a child in the third grade, from their Sackets Harbor home.”

On April 7, Cook learned that the children and their mother were being released. Other third graders made cards to leave on their friend’s desk and created a large welcome sign to hang in the classroom on their first day back at school. Cook feels relief and also that she did her basic job as an educator. Teachers should practice what they teach, she says—civic duty, character, and how to be a good neighbor. “We’re teaching about what it means to live by your morals,” she says. “You gotta walk the walk, otherwise, you’re not a very good teacher. Our kids deserve better than empty words.”

Cook says it’s about more than the children who were taken. “As educators, we know how much fear reduces learning, and so we’re constantly striving to keep all of our students safe, but also to keep them free from fear,” she says. All of the students in Sackets Harbor who were not detained were still affected. “When one of your best friends is taken in the night, that ripples through a classroom,” she says. “When we look out for one of our students, we’re really looking out for all of them.”



**TAKE ACTION** Defend academic freedom and every student’s right to learn at [aclu.org/righttolearn](https://aclu.org/righttolearn).

\*Names changed to protect identities.

## Today's activists are resisting the worst of President Trump's offenses by investing in their communities. **BY WUDAN YAN**

**P**resident Trump's first term was marked by some of the largest mass protests seen in the U.S. in over 50 years, but this time, the resistance looks different. While just as bold, protest today is taking different forms: It's in backyards, community centers, and houses of worship where people are distributing information to protect their neighbors. It's in town halls where activists are challenging their legislators to do more and to answer for why they are not using their power. It's in thousands of peaceful protests demanding a democracy that works for all of us, and it's in hundreds of organizations whose staff and volunteers are defending immigrant and LGBTQ+ communities, as well as the rule of law.

Since January, more than 62,000 new supporters have signed up to volunteer for the ACLU's national grassroots

organizing platform, People Power. Over 9,100 individuals have joined People Power's Know Your Rights trainings, and thousands more have helped organize town halls with ACLU affiliates across the country.

"Every day, I see people on the ground who are resisting President Trump's attacks on our communities, and our numbers show it," says Deirdre Schifeling, the ACLU's chief political and advocacy officer. "This resistance is working. We are slowing down the worst parts of this administration's agenda."

Schifeling adds: "This administration will win when people give up, when people lose hope and give in to the feeling that there is nothing that we can do. We cannot let that happen. The most important thing we can do is step up and fight."

Here are four stories about how people and organizations are showing up in this moment—by coming together, investing in communities, sharing resources, and fighting back.

# THE

# NEW



Community activist  
Anne Emerson at  
home in Sedona, Ariz.

# ACTIVISM





Hundreds attended a town hall in Omaha, Neb., on Presidents' Day to protest the Trump administration's actions.

# THE COALITION

Omaha, Nebraska

Shortly after Inauguration Day, **Mindy Rush Chipman**, executive director of the ACLU of Nebraska, and her team noticed a deep sense of uncertainty and isolation within their community. Against the backdrop of a second Trump administration and its barrage of executive orders, Nebraska legislators were attempting to deny the existence of trans people and assist the federal government in its unlawful

immigration enforcement. They knew they needed to take action quickly to bring Nebraskans together.

In collaboration with ACLU's National Political Advocacy Department and ACLU affiliates in Colorado, New Hampshire, and Kansas, which held their own events, the ACLU of Nebraska organized a rapid-response town hall in Omaha on Presidents' Day. The goal was to create a place for local organizations—including legal service providers, educators, and

**"ADVOCACY  
IS NEEDED  
IN THIS MOMENT  
MORE THAN EVER."**

—MINDY RUSH CHIPMAN,  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF  
THE ACLU OF NEBRASKA

REBECCA S. GRATZ

advocacy groups—to come together and speak directly to their communities about how these executive orders and state actions would impact *them*.

More than 600 people signed up to attend, but the weather on Presidents' Day turned for the worse: It snowed all day, and the temperature hardly crept into the single digits. Although the inclement weather shut down a major stretch of highway, about 200 people still showed up ready to get to work.

"I anticipated it being more of an educational event, explaining what was happening and things you can do when you get home," says Rush Chipman. But the crowd was ready to take action. It felt more like a protest, she recalls. "We were able to activate folks, literally 'Take out your cell phone and call your member of Congress,' right there in the moment."

Media coverage followed, and after the event, residents from across the state contacted the ACLU of Nebraska to get involved. "People want to do tangible things to help locally," says Adairah Thapa, who works with the affiliate's development team. "They want to come to our office. They want to help staff events for us and just be in community."

In addition to mobilizing people, the event connected other organizations, including those in more direct service roles, for future collaborations. "It was a really good opportunity to take a step back and realize the power of collaborative advocacy," notes Rush Chipman, "and how being a part of advocacy is needed in this moment more than ever."

Having multiple ways to organize is key to sustain this level of engagement for the long term, Rush Chipman emphasizes. "We're trying to meet people where they are," she says. "If it's a house party, coming to a protest or town hall event, or following us on social and taking the prompts that we're pushing out electronically—we're trying to make being involved, informed, and activated as accessible as possible."

# THE CONNECTOR

Sedona, Arizona

**A**fter Election Day last fall, **Anne Emerson** of Sedona fell into a daze for weeks. But even as she experienced waves of grief, Emerson recognized the need to protect our civil liberties. Soon after, she woke up with a voice in her head: *Support the ACLU*. "I always knew they would be on the front lines," she says.

As the inauguration approached, Emerson was energized. She was due to attend a Liberal Ladies Lunch—groups of 50 to 90 women who gather monthly nationwide to organize within their communities. She made a simple postcard of places to donate to, subscribe to, or join as a member.

"I told the group, 'I know everyone's exhausted, we're drained, but we can't stop,'" she says. "'Here are some organizations that we need to support right now.'" It was a simple and effective way to galvanize her community.

For Emerson, activism is in her blood. Her mother was a political activist, and Emerson remembers stuffing envelopes for John F. Kennedy when she was as young as 5 years old. "It was part of my lineage, my history," Emerson says. She regularly walked with her mom to get out the vote. "She had the neighborhood wired," she recalls. "She had a phone tree. She would enroll everybody to make sure they got out to vote and [see] if they needed rides. I saw that level of support at the grassroots level, and that is the only thing that ever made sense to me: How you enroll people is you contact them directly."

Emerson spent her career working as a video producer, massage therapist, healer, and artist. But she returned to activism after Trump was elected in 2016. Since last winter, she has helped raise more than \$12,000 for the ACLU and recruited hundreds of volunteers for the ACLU of Arizona.

For Emerson, donating is one way to create a sense of purpose that replaces powerlessness and fear. Handing out Know Your Rights packages in her community's churches, restaurants, libraries, and other public spaces is another way. "We all follow a pretty simple protocol that doesn't put anybody at risk," she says. "We approach people to help their community; it's nonconfrontational, and it's supportive."

Emerson believes that anyone can get involved in activism to protect our civil rights and liberties under this new administration. Start small—go to a community meeting, write some postcards—and don't try and do it all, she says. "Pick a lane that feels like it speaks to your heart, and stay in that lane."



**TAKE ACTION** Join People Power to volunteer in your community. Visit [peoplepower.org](http://peoplepower.org).



# THE ORGANIZER

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

In early March, **Robin Gurung** was busy planning programs for his non-profit organization, Asian Refugees United (ARU), when he received an unexpected phone call.

The caller—a refugee and community leader—had worrying news: A Bhutanese refugee from Harrisburg was being detained in Texas. Another had been detained in Ohio.

Gurung was shocked. He hadn't seen his refugee community as a target: They had arrived in the U.S. through a legal refugee resettlement program during President George W. Bush's term. But since that alarming phone call, Gurung says, everything has shifted.

As of the end of March, ARU reported that at least 12 Bhutanese refugees have been deported to Bhutan from their area. "It means they're deported to the same country that persecuted this community, so there is a danger

to their lives," says Gurung. Bhutan, in turn, sent some of these refugees to India and Nepal, leaving them vulnerable and stateless.

Gurung is the co-executive director of ARU, which he cofounded in 2016 to support the mental health of Bhutanese refugees. He spent 20 years in a refugee camp, which was formative for his work as a community organizer. Today, Gurung and ARU mentor emerging leaders in the Bhutanese community and provide support for LGBTQ+ youth.

ARU is taking an active hand in protecting the rights of refugees. It's formed a rapid-response team, conducted Know Your Rights trainings, and partnered with the Asian Law Caucus for legal support. Earlier this year, the ACLU joined the Asian Law Caucus, Democracy Forward, and other partners to challenge the Trump administration's efforts to ban birth-right citizenship (see "Defending Immigrants' Rights," page 24).

Gurung says these trainings have been invaluable for the refugee community. "Nobody knew [their rights]," he says. "If they knew this information, maybe there would be a different scenario. And to have a lawyer as a new immigrant, a refugee? It has a very big impact."

**"TO HAVE  
A LAWYER AS  
A REFUGEE?  
IT HAS A VERY  
BIG IMPACT."**

—ROBIN GURUNG,  
CO-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ARU

HANNAH YOON/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX

Robin Gurung is  
a community organizer  
in Harrisburg, Pa.





**Jeannie Parent started a visitation group for immigrants detained in Kern County, Calif.**

# THE COMMUNITY LEADER

**Bakersfield, California**

**E**arly in her career, community activist **Jeannie Parent** taught English as a second language in Bakersfield, a city in California's agricultural heartland. She primarily worked with refugees from Southeast Asia. Listening to their stories about how they had fled turmoil in their home countries, Parent became determined to work toward protecting their rights.

She subsequently started a visitation group for immigrants who were being detained in Kern County. Parent named the visitation group KWESI, which stands for Kern Welcoming and Extending Solidarity to Immigrants.

Since the election of President Trump, KWESI has expanded its role to assist not only immigrants in detention

but also immigrants living in the community. It's now part of a rapid-response network that accompanies immigrants to check-ins with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). They have also been informing community members of their rights by conducting in-person trainings. Parent travels around Bakersfield with a stack of red cards that outline constitutional rights so community members can be

**"THEY ARE COUNTING ON PEOPLE NOT KNOWING THEIR RIGHTS."**

**—JEANNIE PARENT, COMMUNITY ACTIVIST**

prepared if they are confronted by an ICE agent.

This level of preparedness is warranted: In January, 65 Border Patrol agents in Kern County stopped and arrested people, transported them 300 miles south, denied them due process, and coerced them into voluntary departure. At least 40 long-term Kern County residents remain stranded in Mexico, separated from their families and community. The ACLU Foundations of Northern California, Southern California, and San Diego & Imperial Counties sued on behalf of the United Farm Workers and five Kern County residents. In late April, a federal court blocked the government from using stop-and-arrest practices that violate federal law.

The Department of Homeland Security is now frustrated because KWESI and other community groups have taught people their rights. "They're counting on people not knowing their rights," says Parent. "That's why the trainings and handing out cards and talking to people are so important—because it works." ■



**TAKE ACTION** Attend a Know Your Rights training. Visit [aclu.org/kyrtraining](https://aclu.org/kyrtraining) to learn more.



MARY  
BETH  
TINKER

# Inspired

by Today's Youth Activists



Back in 1965, I was just 13 years old, but I believed students had the right to speak out against injustice. I wore a black armband to school to protest the Vietnam War—and was suspended. But I didn't back down.

With the ACLU by my side, we took our case all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1969, the Court ruled in *Tinker v. Des Moines* that students don't "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate."

**That ruling changed my life. I didn't realize the legacy I was leaving at the time—but have seen its impact on generations of students.**

Today, I'm thrilled to see young people carrying on that legacy boldly and bravely. They're walking out of classrooms, testifying before lawmakers, challenging censorship, and demanding justice—from racial equity to LGBTQ+ rights.

**If you believe in and want to protect what they're building—I hope you'll consider creating your own legacy by including the ACLU as a beneficiary of your will, trust, retirement plan, or life insurance.**

A future gift to the ACLU sends a powerful message to the next generation: **You matter. Your voice matters. And we believe in you.**

Youth activists are shaping the future—and I'm grateful that the ACLU is still here, fighting alongside them. You can ensure the ACLU will always be here, fighting with every generation, just as they did for me.

—Mary Beth Tinker

**Learn more about how to include a gift in your will or other estate plan.**

Visit [aclu.org/mylegacy](https://aclu.org/mylegacy) | Return the enclosed reply envelope | Contact us directly at [legacy@aclu.org](mailto:legacy@aclu.org)



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- Center the QR code and tap the link.

**ACLU**



# DEFENDING IMMIGRANTS' RIGHTS

**After establishing countless cruel policies during its first term, the Trump administration has reignited its war on immigrants. The ACLU is waging the latest battle to defend legal rights and due process for immigrants and for everyone.**

**BY THE ACLU**

**A**mong his first official actions, President Trump signed multiple executive orders that directly threaten and scapegoat immigrant communities. The orders seek to eliminate birthright citizenship, expand mass deportation, and shut down asylum. His administration is still continuing its anti-immigrant campaign, disregarding fundamental principles of democracy and the rule of law.

“This is an unprecedented power grab that will put countless lives in danger,” says Lee

Gelernt, deputy director of the ACLU Immigrants’ Rights Project.

The administration’s efforts have repeatedly violated core civil liberties, including the right to due process and free speech. The ACLU has responded swiftly and strategically. At press time, the ACLU has filed 52 legal actions challenging the administration’s lawless moves against immigrants. The courts are agreeing with us, pushing back and holding the line against the government’s worst abuses.

Read on to learn more about how the administration is violating our country’s core rights and values in its effort to villainize immigrant communities.



## THE RIGHT

# BIRTHRIGHT CITIZENSHIP

**THE FACTS** On day one of his administration, President Trump issued an executive order attempting to ban birthright citizenship. Guaranteed by the 14th Amendment of the Constitution, birthright citizenship is the principle that every baby born in the United States is a U.S. citizen, regardless of race, color, or ancestry. The 14th Amendment was ratified in 1868 and overturned a shameful court decision that denied Black Americans the rights and protections of U.S. citizenship. In 1898, the Supreme Court confirmed that anyone born in the United States is a U.S. citizen. Birthright citizenship has remained an inviolable right ever since.

**WHY IT MATTERS** Trump's ban on birth citizenship would violate the Constitution. It would repeat one of the gravest moments in history, when people were denied their rights based on race, color, or ancestry. It would create a permanent subclass of people born in the U.S. who are denied full rights. Children who were no longer eligible for citizenship would be unable to obtain identification and, as they grew up, be denied the right to vote, serve on juries, hold certain jobs, and otherwise be a full member of American society.

**THE FIGHT** Within an hour of Trump signing the document, the ACLU and

its partners filed a lawsuit challenging the executive order. A federal district court ruled in the ACLU's favor and temporarily blocked the order nationwide. Federal courts in Maryland and Washington also blocked the policy in separate lawsuits, declaring Trump's executive order "blatantly unconstitutional." At press time, the U.S. Supreme Court opened the door for partial enforcement of the administration's executive order restricting birthright citizenship. The ACLU immediately filed a new nationwide class-action lawsuit challenging the order. "This attempt to deny babies their citizenship is as illegal as it is inhumane," said Cody Wofsy, deputy director of the ACLU Immigrants' Rights Project, who argued the case, "and we will keep fighting until we stop this order for good."



**“WHEN CIVIL RIGHTS  
AND CIVIL LIBERTIES  
ARE THREATENED  
FOR ONE GROUP,  
THEY’RE THREATENED  
FOR EVERYBODY.”**

— MARIBEL HERNÁNDEZ RIVERA,  
ACLU NATIONAL DIRECTOR OF IMMIGRANT  
COMMUNITY STRATEGIES



## THE RIGHT

# DUE PROCESS

**THE FACTS** In March, President Trump invoked the Alien Enemies Act (AEA)—a wartime law passed in 1798 that’s only been used three times in history—to set in motion the swift transfer of hundreds of people to a foreign prison without any legal process. Due process is enshrined in the Constitution. It ensures fairness in legal proceedings for both citizens and non-citizens: Without it, society becomes a police state. The ACLU and Democracy Forward immediately filed a lawsuit to block the administration from using the AEA to arrest and deport Venezuelan nationals accused of being members of the Tren de Aragua gang. Despite the court’s verbal and written orders to cease the deportations, the Trump administration transferred hundreds of men to a prison in El Salvador that’s notorious for its flagrant human rights abuses and indefinite detention.

**WHY IT MATTERS** The AEA was previously used to incarcerate Japanese Americans during World War II, one of the most shameful moments in U.S. history. The invocation of the centuries-old law to accelerate mass deportations—sidestepping the procedures and protections of immigration law—is unlawful and unprecedented. “The Trump administration’s intent to use a wartime authority for immigration enforcement is as unprecedented as it is lawless,” says the ACLU’s Lee Gelernt, who is arguing the case. “It may be the administration’s most extreme measure yet.” The use of the AEA is another way the Trump administration is deliberately escalating a climate of fear for immigrant communities and undermining democracy. If the government is allowed to deport immigrants to prisons overseas without due process, it will surely turn to other groups soon.

**THE FIGHT** Since the ACLU filed its original challenge, the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that people targeted for removal can challenge their deportation in the federal district in which they are held. The ACLU filed multiple new lawsuits in response. In May, a federal court in southern Texas permanently blocked the administration from using the AEA against anyone being held in that court’s judicial district. Federal courts in New York and Colorado soon followed. The courts are unequivocal: Trump cannot rewrite, ignore, or supersede our laws to justify his lawless deportation agenda. The ACLU is continuing to challenge the administration’s use of this wartime law, while vigorously fighting in court to bring back those who’ve already been deported to a Salvadoran prison.

## RAISING OUR VOICES

*Maribel Hernández Rivera is the ACLU’s national director of immigrant community strategies. The following is an excerpt from an interview with Hernández Rivera that originally aired on the ACLU’s podcast, At Liberty.*

I come from a mixed-status family. My husband himself has temporary protected status. He has been in the country for more than 20 years. We have been married for 15 years, and despite all of those roots, all those relationships with the community, he’s in danger.

When civil rights and civil liberties are threatened for one group, they’re threatened for everybody. It affects all of us. And just as easily as [the government] can go after one group, it will go after everybody, which is why the ACLU protects civil rights and civil liberties for everyone.

I went to law school because I wanted to protect immigrants’ rights. One way to fight back is going to the courts, and it’s a very important way, but there are also many other ways: being on the streets and raising our voices.

We know that when we push back, we can win. For example, the DACA program for undocumented people who came here as children was won because it was fought [for] by undocumented youth who were unafraid and unapologetic. They said, “We deserve to be in this country, just like everybody else.”

There is another way, there is another vision [for immigration]. We know the value in our society, in our communities. Every single one of us, it is our responsibility to show that a different way is possible.



**“THE ADMINISTRATION  
IS DEPRIVING EVERYBODY  
OF THE RIGHT TO HEAR  
SPEECH THAT  
MIGHT DISSENT FROM  
THE PARTY LINE.”**

— BEN WIZNER, DIRECTOR OF  
THE ACLU’S SPEECH, PRIVACY, AND  
TECHNOLOGY PROJECT

#### **THE RIGHT**

## **ASYLUM**

**THE FACTS** On Inauguration Day, the Trump administration suspended asylum at the southern border and canceled existing appointments for thousands of asylum seekers. President Trump cited an “invasion” as justification to deny asylum protections expressly granted by Congress. His actions ignore protections backed by the courts for generations that ensure that people have a chance to have their asylum claims heard.

**WHY IT MATTERS** This unprecedented ban on asylum leaves no avenue open for

people to seek asylum, even if they present themselves at a port of entry. No president has the authority to unilaterally override the protections Congress has afforded those fleeing danger. Simply, it is an executive overreach that will threaten the lives of thousands of people.

**THE FIGHT** In February, the ACLU challenged the Trump administration’s attempt to shut down asylum at the border. The federal lawsuit was filed on behalf of Las Americas Immigrant

Advocacy Center, the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services, and the Florence Immigrant & Refugee Rights Project, which provide legal services to people seeking asylum but would be unable to do so under President Trump’s order. In keeping with our country’s values, asylum laws were designed to ensure that people who are fleeing the unimaginable have meaningful opportunities to seek safety for themselves and their families. The ACLU will continue to defend those core tenets.



## THE RIGHT

# FREE SPEECH

**THE FACTS** On March 8, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) arrested and detained Mahmoud Khalil, a lawful permanent resident and recent graduate of Columbia University, because of his advocacy and political views. They claimed Khalil's green card had been revoked, even though green card holders are permanent residents entitled to due process before any revocation of their status. He was one of the first of dozens of international scholars and students the Trump administration targeted for deportation in retaliation for their constitutionally

protected speech. On March 25, ICE detained Tufts University PhD student and Fulbright scholar Rümeysa Öztürk for coauthoring an op-ed in her school newspaper months prior. She was on her way to an iftar dinner with friends in Somerville, Massachusetts, when she was put in an unmarked car and ultimately transported to Louisiana. She spent six weeks there, until May 9, when a judge ordered her immediate release. On April 14, ICE detained Columbia University student Mohsen Mahdawi outside his naturalization interview in retaliation for his activism. A green card

holder, Mahdawi is a lawful permanent resident of the United States and has lived in Vermont for 10 years. He has since been released on bail.

**WHY IT MATTERS** The unlawful arrest and deportation of international students and immigrants represents a frightening escalation in the Trump administration's efforts to silence speech with which it disagrees and to use immigration laws to weaken First Amendment protections. Under the First Amendment, the federal government does not have the authority to deport individuals or revoke their residency on the basis of viewpoint alone. The right to free speech includes advocacy for any population, movement, or cause—including criticizing our own government and officials. If the government can come after one of us for speech the administration disagrees with, they can—and will—come after any of us.

**THE FIGHT** In multiple cases, the ACLU has protected international students and immigrants targeted for detention and deportation solely because of their First Amendment-protected speech. Along with partner law firms, the ACLU has blocked the Trump administration from deporting our clients while litigation continues. “[The administration] is depriving everybody in this country of the right to hear speech that might dissent from the party line,” says Ben Wizner, director of the ACLU's Speech, Privacy, and Technology Project. “That's why these cases are so important.” ■



**TAKE ACTION** Dissent is not grounds for deportation. Tell Congress to defend the right to free speech at [aclu.org/action](https://aclu.org/action).











**A thousand artists and activists across 35 states and D.C. contributed artwork to the installation.**

# COMMUNITY

## TRANS RIGHTS

### Freedom to Be

**On May 17**, the ACLU unveiled the Freedom to Be monument on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., a powerful tribute to transgender joy and resilience amid the rising tide of anti-trans legislation. Inspired by the legacy of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, displayed in 1987, the installation not only combats the scapegoating of this community but also honors the stories of trans people nationwide. Spelling out Freedom to Be, the monument is composed of 258 panels, each 6 feet by 6 feet, created by hundreds of trans people and allies from across the country. Each panel is a unique response to the question “What does ‘freedom to be’ mean to me?”

ALLISON SHELLEY



# Creatives for Freedom

Leaders across creative industries are rallying together to support the ACLU.

The ACLU's latest corporate engagement initiative, Creatives for Freedom, is honoring the legacy of activism and advocacy in visionary communities—including fashion, beauty, entertainment, and hospitality—and propelling it forward. Through this new initiative, luminary artists, brands, and designers are coming together across industries to back the ACLU's work by raising awareness and funds and connecting their audiences with opportunities to take meaningful action in support of civil rights and liberties as the Trump administration attempts to strip them away.

Creatives for Freedom officially launched on April 23 at the Standard Hotel in New York, hosted by ACLU Artist Ambassador for Immigrants' & Women's Rights Padma Lakshmi and designers Gabriela Hearst and Willy Chavarria. Both designers have recently worn ACLU merch on the runway to show that activism still has a place in fashion. The launch event included a fireside chat with ACLU Deputy Executive Director for Strategy & Culture AJ Hikes and ACLU National Legal Director Cecillia Wang, as well as a celebration of the creatives who are uniting to protect and advance fundamental freedoms. —TOM VELLNER



Fashion designer Willy Chavarria wears an ACLU shirt during his Spring 2025 show "América," a celebration of his Mexican American heritage and U.S. farmworkers.



## The People's Project

Curated by authors Saeed Jones and Maggie Smith, *The People's Project* (Washington Square Press; September 9, 2025) is an anthology featuring 26 writers who have contributed poems, essays, and visual art to inspire action as civil rights and liberties continue to come under attack. The collection emphasizes community, resilience, and healing and was inspired by Jones's and Smith's conversations following the 2024 election. Contributors include Chase Strangio, codirector of the ACLU's LGBTQ & HIV Project, Alexander Chee, Tiana Clark, Imani Perry, Alice Wong, and Marlon James. The work explores themes such as the wisdom of the transgender community, the power of nature, and the importance of hope in survival. *The People's Project* serves as a resource for those seeking strength and solidarity in challenging times. —T.V.

**TAKE ACTION** Join People Power to volunteer in your community. Learn more at [peoplepower.org](https://peoplepower.org).



## Changing Laws Won't Change Us

Illustration and text by Amir Khadar

This illustration depicts a thriving, multigenerational network of Black trans people. Through generations of marginalization, we've always cared for one another, embodied resilience, and lived authentically. Now is no different. With or without legal support from our governments, we are still trans and we will continue to exist.



# Amplifying Undocumented Voices

NYCLU organizer Ignacio Acevedo is fostering leadership in immigrant communities.

**NAME:** Ignacio Acevedo

**LOCATION:** Hudson Valley, New York

**FOCUS:** Immigrants' Rights

Becoming an organizer for immigrants' rights was an easy choice for Ignacio Acevedo. Born in Mexico, he moved with his family to New York State as a young child and spent his teens going to school and working in Orange and surrounding counties, just up the Hudson River from New York City. Not

only was he one of the first Mexican kids at his school but he was also the only one pulling shifts at local factories and farms—jobs that were off the books because Acevedo was undocumented.

He spent years building expertise in advocacy and research, and in 2022, Acevedo joined the New York Civil Liberties Union as a community organizer, focusing on school board elections in the Hudson Valley.

"It's part of me," says Acevedo, who is now a citizen. "I have to be involved."

One local school district is a prime example of why organizers like Acevedo want to enfranchise undocumented parents in school board elections: Its board is majority white, but the student body is predominantly Latine. Many of those students' parents are undocumented, so families have no voice in how their schools are run.

In 2023, Acevedo trained three undocumented women from the community to lead a street canvass about school improvements. They collected over 2,000 symbolic votes from parents who couldn't vote on their school budget—more than the total number of votes cast in the district.

"The purpose of it was to give a voice to this community that nobody listens to and to begin to create leadership within the community," he says.

Now, the Trump administration has put a chill on organizing around immigrants' rights. But Acevedo knows the pendulum will swing back, and he wants to be ready to make change when that happens.

"I want this change to come from us," he says. "That's why I'm trying to create those leaders."

—WILLY BLACKMORE

Ignacio Acevedo photographed in Orange County, New York.



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**Kenneth Roth was the executive director of Human Rights Watch from 1993 to 2022.**



## Righting Wrongs

### By Kenneth Roth

**I** think it's important to start by saying that even in the most dire situations, it is possible to make a difference. And when the stakes are life and death, even a small difference can be tremendously important. One of the biggest challenges we faced during my time at Human Rights Watch was trying to stop the slaughter of civilians in Syria. The enormity of the problem required initiative and persistence to build enough pressure to have an impact.

After brutal repression of anti-government protests in early 2011 yielded an armed conflict, Syria became synonymous with mass atrocities. The carnage was so awful that it was a central focus of Human Rights Watch and a personal preoccupation for me. Despite the magnitude of the challenge, we helped to curtail this unspeakable cruelty.

Throughout the fighting, the Syrian government ripped up the rule book—international humanitarian law—that is designed to spare civilians the hazards of war. Instead, it targeted civilians. It dropped barrel bombs on them (oil drums filled with explosives and shrapnel to maximize damage), deployed chemical weapons against them, starved them, and forcibly disappeared, tortured, and executed them.

To better understand the horrors unfolding, I periodically visited Gaziantep, the Turkish city known as a sister of Syria's Aleppo. During my visits, Gaziantep was the hub for humanitarian operations in rebel-held northwestern Syria. I spoke

with refugee families, orphans, humanitarian workers, and especially doctors, who were impressively trying to provide health care in very dangerous circumstances.

We combined the information that I learned with the evidence collected by Human Rights Watch investigators in Syria and deployed it to persuade then-Chancellor Merkel of Germany, President Macron of France, and President Erdogan of Turkey to pressure Russian President Putin to stop the bombing by Russian and Syrian forces. That succeeded after a multiyear effort, which began in March 2020.

Most human rights work is incremental, progress sporadic. Violations of human rights wax and wane. Persistent pressure is often needed to sustain progress. Moreover, when progress occurs, Human Rights Watch can rarely take credit alone. Local human rights defenders, sympathetic journalists, well-intentioned officials, and engaged members of the public are valued allies. The defense of human rights is a team effort. That defense also requires humility. It is not an endeavor of easy or permanent victories. But modesty is not the same as resignation or indifference. Mitigating human rights violations may not sound as dramatic as ending them definitively, but it can make an enormous difference for the people affected. That is what kept me going during my three decades leading Human Rights Watch.

*This is an excerpt from Righting Wrongs: Three Decades on the Front Lines Battling Abusive Governments (Knopf; February 25, 2025) by Kenneth Roth, the former executive director of Human Rights Watch.*



## State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes July 21, 1925

One of the ACLU's earliest and most seminal cases turned 100 this year—the Scopes Trial of 1925, also known as the “Scopes Monkey Trial.” When the state of Tennessee passed a law making it a crime to teach evolution in public schools, high school biology teacher John Thomas Scopes challenged the law by teaching the banned subject in his class. When Scopes was eventually prosecuted, the ACLU partnered with celebrated attorney Clarence Darrow to defend him. Although Scopes was found guilty (the verdict was later overturned because of a sentencing error), the trial made national headlines and persuaded the public of the importance of academic freedom.



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