



Episode 21: Libraries Under Threat with Gavin Downing

Transcript *(lightly edited for readability)*

[00:00:00] Roxy Manning:

Hi, I'm Roxy Manning.

[00:00:18] Sarah Peyton:

And I'm Sarah Peyton. We're the hosts of the Fierce Compassion podcast. On this episode of Fierce Compassion, we're delighted to talk with Gavin Downing, who has been in education for over 17 years and has been a teacher librarian for over 10.

[00:00:36] Roxy Manning:

Gavin successfully stopped an attempt to ban books in his school library in 2022 and has been recognized by both the Washington Library Association and the Washington Education Association for his work, including receiving the Washington Library Association's Candace Morgan Intellectual Freedom Award in 2022.

[00:01:01] Sarah Peyton:

Roxy, what most moved me in talking to Gavin was his intense experience, what he had to live through to save the books in his library and to preserve the voice of kids whose voices often are not heard.

[00:01:20] Roxy Manning:

Yes, I was also incredibly inspired that as he worked to stop the banning of these books, he was really able to incorporate some of the principles of nonviolence, including how to lift up and make visible the challenges people were experiencing. And he also named some incredible books that I can't wait to read, and we'll make sure to let all of our readers know where they can find those titles.

[00:01:48] Sarah Peyton:

Join us to learn how to save your library.

Welcome Gavin.

[00:02:06] Gavin Downing:

Thank you so much.

[00:02:07] Sarah Peyton:

The question we ask every guest that we'd love to start out with is how do you define self-compassion and how has it played a role in your work and your life?

[00:02:19] Gavin Downing:

Well, that's a big question. Self-compassion can sometimes be tricky. I know that during all of this I was often questioning myself. I had a lot of imposter syndrome, you know. But I would remind myself why I was doing what I was doing, and I surrounded myself with people who uplifted me and reminded me of the importance of what I was doing. And so for me, I think a lot of it does involve having people around you who can help uplift you.

[00:03:07] Roxy Manning:

Hmm. There's something really sweet that often doesn't get named when you talk about self-compassion in this way, which is that it's much easier to hold self-compassion when we have other people also bathing us in compassion, right?

[00:03:23] Gavin Downing:

That's right. That's exactly it. And, you know, I'll say that feeds into what I try to do with my work. I just came back from Washington Library Association's conference for this year, where the theme was We All Belong. And I try to have that be a thing in my school library, where I want everyone, all of the students, all of the teachers, all of the staff to know that this is a place where everyone belongs, where I welcome everyone and thank them for being there. And when they head out, I thank them for having come in and wish them a great day. And that sense of making sure it's a place where people feel safe and cared for is a key part of my librarianship.

[00:04:15] Roxy Manning:

Mm hmm. Yeah, so I'm actually curious, like, how did you start in teaching and were you always a librarian? Tell us a little bit about your origin story.

[00:04:26] Gavin Downing:

Sure, sure. So, my mother's parents were both educators. My grandfather had been... he was teaching since about, I want to say 1940 or so. He took a brief pause to serve in the Pacific during World War II, and then went back to educating, became a principal at a middle school and eventually retired after, oh, jeeze close to 40 years of teaching, you know, administration. My grandmother did probably about 15 or 20 years as a kindergarten teacher as well. And public education has always been an important part of my family's values. And I really thought teaching would be a good path for me, and that's what I did.

My first year teaching was the 2006-2007 school year. I was married by that point, and shortly after I started teaching, my wife went for her master's degree. She did her master's in library science, becoming a librarian. She did her classes online, and I kind of sat in on the classes too. And, as a result, I was like, hey, this would be a really cool direction for me to go. Initially, I thought maybe I wouldn't want to leave the classroom because I love that connection with the students, but I realized I could still have that connection, with the whole student body from the library. And so, when I went for my masters, I did it in education, but with that endorsement in library media studies.

[00:06:13] Roxy Manning:

What are some of the ways that your identity, if at all, has shaped how you see yourself as a teacher or a librarian?

[00:06:22] Gavin Downing:

Well... So, I am a mostly able-bodied, cis, straight, white guy. I have a lot of privilege, and I recognize that. And I recognize that I have more than a lot of my students have. I try to use my privilege to uplift other people's voices, those who are often marginalized or historically excluded. I do my best to listen and take guidance from those who have different lived experiences than I do. And so I put a lot of thought into assuring that my identity doesn't overpower those of other people around me. That's probably how I would answer that.

[00:07:18] Roxy Manning:

I'm hearing this kind of throughline from your grandparents' service and being really committed to public education, and then your recognition that in some ways that history gave you privilege, and your identities have given you privilege, and it's all about maintaining connection and service to the student body.

[00:07:36] Gavin Downing:

Absolutely. I will tell you my grandfather was ahead of his time in a lot of ways as well. Back in the fifties when he was doing his master's thesis, he was working in a part of California that had a lot of migrant farm workers, many of them from Mexico. A lot of them did not speak English as their primary language. Some of them did not speak English at all at home. His master's thesis was about the importance of learning their language, learning their culture, not trying to force them to be something they're not, but instead meeting them where they live and helping them grow from there. And that was not a common perspective in the fifties, even among educators. And so that kind of perspective was one that he and my grandmother and my mother really did instill in me.

[00:08:34] Sarah Peyton:

Who were they inspired by? I mean, were they connected with Highlander? Were they part of the, were they doing this all on their own or were they part of the larger movement coming out of WPA and the...

[00:08:47] Gavin Downing:

You know, I wish that they were still around so I could talk to them about that. My wife and I married on their 60th wedding anniversary and my grandfather passed just a few months shy of their 70th anniversary. My grandmother passed a few years after that. But they were so compassionate and so caring and every time there was a family gathering, my wife who was an educator as well as being a librarian, and myself and my grandparents, we would go off and sit in the corner and talk shop. They loved to hear the stories of things that were still going on in the classroom because, you know, as much as society has changed, kids have not. Kids are still kids.

[00:09:41] Sarah Peyton:

Well, then, in your experience of being a school librarian, what have you seen books do for kids, and why are diverse books so important?

[00:09:52] Gavin Downing:

So, diversity, you know, we talk about how important it is for people to see themselves reflected in books, and that is absolutely true. To serve as a mirror, right? So that you can see yourself reflected in the book, in the literature of the world, so you know there's a place for you out there. And this is tying back into my identity. I also recognize it's just as important for other people to see those sorts of kids in the world. Growing up, most of the heroes that I had were white guys like me, right? Not a lot of female heroes were uplifted in a way that were aimed at me. A few exceptions, you know, Princess Leia was one of my favorites, of course, and there were a small number of female G. I. Joe characters, but there weren't a lot. And I think it's really important, not just for BIPOC students to see BIPOC characters uplifted, but for white, students to see BIPOC characters uplifted, for LGBTQ students to see LGBTQ characters, but also for straight students to see LGBTQ characters uplifted. Because it's important for us to see that anyone can be a hero, that we can uplift and celebrate some amazing heroes who don't necessarily look exactly like us. And that's... that's so important. I have seen, in my time as a librarian, I have seen students who didn't think they liked to read find that one book that they connect with, and suddenly it's like the floodgates open. And by becoming a reader, that helps open the door to lifelong love of learning. It's just... it is transformative.

[00:11:54] Roxy Manning:

I'm feeling so moved when I hear you talk about the importance of not just people with marginalized identities seeing themselves in books, but also people with more privileged identities seeing people with marginalized identities in these positions and roles of power. And I'm thinking about one of my favorite children's book was *Amazing Grace*, and one of the things that was really amazing about that book was not just that the black female student at the center of it was, you know, saying, "I can be Peter Pan, I can be anything I want to be," but it was also like the teacher who was saying, "You can't be Peter Pan" had to see, "Oh my gosh, wait, you can be Peter Pan!" And so it's exactly this, that when we see the possibility we need to change the minds of the people with the power who are keeping some of these kids in boxes. So really loving hearing this!

[00:12:46] Gavin Downing:

Absolutely! Absolutely, 100%!

[00:12:49] Roxy Manning:

Wow. So, I know you're doing some amazing work stopping the book bans. And I'd love to hear a little bit more. What was your first idea that people wanted to ban books at your libraries? And what books did they want to ban?

[00:13:05] Gavin Downing:

Okay, so this was a little over two years ago now. I was at a different school. I was at Cedar Heights Middle School, which is part of the Kent School District. And I had made a decision to really focus on the LGBTQ books that year. We had some, but I wanted to make sure that I was really growing that section that year. And I knew that book bans were starting to be on the rise, book challenges were starting to be on the rise, but you know, way back in 2008, when my wife was getting her

Master in Library Science, ever since then, the two of us have always talked, you know, it'll be one of our date conversations or something like that, about strategies and plans, when the book ban, and the book challenge comes, not if, but when. And that's an important perspective because, you know, first of all, it made sure that I never retreated away from getting an important book because someone might find it upsetting. The reality is that if I don't have books that someone finds probably, you know, an issue, I'm not serving all my patrons. I'm not serving all my students. Because some of my students, their identities, their existence, is something that some people are offended by. And so, by keeping it in that perspective, I was always expecting to eventually face at least one book challenge. I figured it was going to be a part of the process. So that particular year, one of the books that I ordered - now this was at a middle school that served seventh and eighth grade, so students are between age 12 to 14, basically - and this one book I looked at, it's called *Jack of Hearts (and Other Parts)* by Lev Rosen, and I looked at it very closely because it definitely seemed a little on the spicier side, and I looked at it and I read it and decided that it would be a good match for some of my 8th grade students. I probably wouldn't have kept it if I just had 7th grade, but I think for the right student, it could save their life. This is a book, it does not have any sex scenes in it or anything like that, but it's a book about an out queer teen who is persuaded by his friends to start writing a sex advice column. And the author included the sex advice columns in the book. He gets a stalker and that's the main plot of the book, is he gets a stalker as a result of putting this together. And the author took questions from actual teens, and he got assistance from professional sex educators to answer the questions. So it was all medically accurate, stressing the importance of consent, stressing the importance of safer sex practices, all with that queer lens to it. Much of it is in line with a lot of our own state's 8th grade sex health curriculum. Just making sure that kids are ready for those choices that some of them are starting to make at that age.

So I added it to the collection, and a couple months later, my principal actually, came into my library, carrying the book, went not to me, but to my aide who had a student at the school, opened it to a page, held it out to her and said, "Read that page and tell me what you think as a parent." Now, I intervened at this point. I said, "Hey, I'm familiar with this book. I vetted it very closely and very carefully. If you don't want it here there is a challenge process, but I would ask that you first read the book in its entirety." She responded by saying, "Well, I'll read it. But if I don't like it, it won't be on the shelf." So, the next day, she had finished reading the book, she read it that night. She asked me to come in after school and asked me to bring all of the books with, quote, "sexually explicit content." Now, Washington State actually has a definition of what, legally, "sexually explicit" means. There is nothing in that library that fits that definition, including the things she was considering. But a lot of us can have different definitions of those words. So I grabbed a bunch of books that had been accused of being sexually explicit, and I brought those into the meeting along with union representation, because I was not feeling safe at that point. And, you know, the books were things like, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Are You There God, It's Me, Margaret*, a human biology book, a human pregnancy book, the Bible, things like this that some people have accused of being sexually explicit. She did not like that. She did not like the books I brought in. The meeting did not go well. She was not listening to anything I said. When I brought

up the ALA's right to read, the American Library Association's right to read, she said, well, ALA is just for public libraries, not school libraries, which is not true.

It just... It did not go well. And things escalated over the next month or so. She pulled another book. So a second book was actually at that first meeting. It was called, *If I Was Your Girl* by Meredith Russo. That one is a book about a trans girl who moves to a new school where no one knows she's trans and starts developing a close relationship with a popular boy at the school. And she grows concerned about what will happen if their relationship, or when their relationship, moves to the point where she is out to him as trans. She did not like this book because there was a scene in which a guy puts his hand up a girl's skirt. And as far as she's concerned, that at middle school, there should be nothing beyond hand holding and maybe kissing. She pulled another book that I had ordered out of my mail, without even telling me; I only knew because, first of all, my mail came opened, the book was missing, and when I went through the office later that day, I saw it sitting on my vice principal's desk. And that book is *All Boys Aren't Blue* by George M. Johnson, it's probably the number two banned book in America right now. He calls it his memoir manifesto, about what it is to grow up at the intersection of being both black and queer, and he talks about his experiences in life, but also what we can learn from that and how we can use that to make the world a better place for everyone. It's a very powerful book, very strong, and she didn't want that one either, because he talks about losing his virginity.

[00:20:25] Roxy Manning:

Yeah, well, one of the things that's really striking me is, I can imagine people having differing opinions, but what I'm also getting is a sense of heavy handedness. It was no longer even considering, let's have dialogue, but just like, I'm going to open your mail and take things out. I'm going to do things in this very top-down way.

[00:20:46] Gavin Downing:

Absolutely. And I have these emails I sent her that explained, you know, the ethical considerations, the legal ramifications, all of these things. And she, I don't even think she read them. And she was contacting other principals and telling them to start to do the same thing. So I was hearing from other librarians going, hey, there's a problem here.

So, my union was trying to talk to the administration, saying this is not okay, this is not the policy, it's not the procedure. Administration was telling my union reps, oh, they're the principal, they can do whatever they want, they don't have to follow the procedures. Yeah, so...

[00:21:29] Sarah Peyton:

Wait, tell us more about the story. How were you doing emotionally? How did people remind you who you were? Just give us a little bit of sense of that about the where compassion or self-compassion found its way in.

[00:21:43] Gavin Downing:

The good news is that my wife is so amazing. She was standing by me. We knew what steps to take. We knew who to contact. I'd started dialogue with the ACLU, with the ALA. Another organization that was very helpful was GLSEN, which is an organization that focuses on assuring

that LGBTQ youth have a free and safe and equitable education. And so they were getting involved. In fact, at the time, the state president of GLSEN was also on the school board for Kent. And so he was, you know, trying to figure out what was going on and help out.

There was not a lot of people I'd reached out to at this point, because I was trying to resolve it quietly, but I was getting my ducks in a row in case I needed to escalate. And so it was very stressful, but I did have, you know, probably the single biggest person of support was my wife. Because we'd been planning this for a while. We weren't expecting it to come from the principal. We were expecting it to come externally, but we were still ready, otherwise.

[00:23:00] Sarah Peyton:

Did you have a sense your job was a threat?

[00:23:03] Gavin Downing:

It would have been if my union had not been there by my side. The union president actually just became my personal rep for this whole situation. She was insistent that this was where she wanted to be. I mean, I was so thankful for her help, too.

Eventually, because it seemed to be escalating further - there wasn't really any sense that it was gonna quiet down or back down - I reported it to the media. And in particular, there were two places that made reports, the one of them was the Seattle Times did a report and also a national organization that focuses on books, Book Riot, did a report and that one was retweeted by Neil Gaiman who said, this is really bad, you guys need to look at this.

Immediately, the story shifted from the district. I was being told that, oh, it's actually a student who's complained. But we can't tell you who the student was, but we're following all the processes. And I'm like, well, the process starts with a conversation with me, I haven't had that conversation. Oh, well, the principal had it for them. No, that, that's not the same thing. This is about finding solutions. If this person's not there, I can't find a solution with them. They also were saying, oh, and the books remain on the shelves while the challenges are on place. Well, they were snuck back on while I was out for a day. But they were on the shelf again. And so when I pointed out, hey, these processes have not been followed. They went ahead and dropped them. The district said, okay, this is not fine. If we want to do it, they have to start from scratch.

And I want to say it was about half an hour later. I got a formal challenge on the first book, on *Jack of Hearts*, and it was from someone who did not have any students at the school. However, my understanding is she had worked with my principal before and that they attended the same church.

Once it went public, things did get a lot more difficult for me because my principal definitely played politics a lot. Tried to get people to be on her side and against me, and whenever I went to work, I would feel like I was going behind enemy lines. I would have some allies, but none in my immediate vicinity for the most part. It was a very stressful time. I had to be on guard the entire

time I was at work because there were people looking to see if they could get me in trouble, interpret anything I was saying in the worst possible way. I never was in trouble for anything that happened during that time, but they tried a few times to get me on the hook for things and I had to be on guard constantly. And I would start to, you know, wake up in the middle of the night in cold sweats. They would do things like change the locks on my office without telling me. There was one person who treated me with respect and kindness in that space. Everyone else, the moment I stepped in, they would stop and just glare at me. If I had to work with them, they would do the very basics, and as soon as they were done, they'd either ignore me or glare at me. It was very hostile.

[00:26:51] Sarah Peyton:

This sounds horrendous. Luckily, we heard that this is not the school that you're still working at, so you're not still having to do this.

[00:27:00] Gavin Downing:

Correct.

[00:27:01] Sarah Peyton:

Let's find out how and why you were successful.

[00:27:06] Gavin Downing:

So it took a grand total, from when the day that my principal stepped in with the books until it finally was all done, was over six months. There was the formal book challenge process. There were several steps to that. The short version was, first, my principal got to make a decision. We know how she was going to decide. I then appealed that decision. It went to the Instructional Materials Committee. My principal sort of seemed to make some suggestions on how that should be run, and so it was treated like curricular material. It was a mess. And so they decided that it should be removed, but they also decided that belonged in the library. So it was... it was a mess, but they were saying it should be removed. So then I appealed it from there to the school board. The school board made their final decision shortly after the school year was over, in June, and the decision... It ended up surprising me because it was a five person board. One of my allies resigned for her own mental health shortly before the decision was made. And so I had a four person board, I needed a majority to overturn, and the final decision was one person voting to ban the book, two people voting to keep it, and one person abstaining. So it was a very, very close decision.

Thankfully, before that happened, I knew late May, early June, that I was going to be able to move to a new school. I'd been asking since February, when I learned that the librarian at Kentridge was retiring, I asked, my union even asked, can we just reallocate him so he doesn't have to interview? He's just going to be moved over there out of this hostile environment to a safer environment for him. And the district didn't really make up their minds for a while. They finally did in late May or early June. So at that point, I knew I would be safe.

[00:29:16] Roxy Manning:

There are a couple of things that I'm hearing as you talk about what's happened that I just want to really lift up when I think about organizing. And so one, was that you and your wife were anticipating this happening. So you were doing a lot of clarifying your principles, why you were doing this and what your intentions were, and then what are the steps you would take to respond. And it sounds like having that clarity about how are we going to respond when this happens was really key in being able to respond effectively.

[00:29:44] Gavin Downing:

100%. Absolutely. Absolutely.

[00:29:48] Roxy Manning:

And the other thing that I also want to just really name is the importance of having those allies, either the union person, who really seemed like they had your back, but then also like making sure that this wasn't just this internal fight, right? So making it public, going to the media.

[00:30:05] Gavin Downing:

Oh yeah, absolutely.

[00:30:07] Roxy Manning:

Yeah. So, so beautiful to see you taking these kind of like nonviolent action steps to keep the light on this is what's happening, this is who's being impacted. Yeah, beautiful!

[00:30:18] Gavin Downing:

And in March, I was surprised by Washington Library Association awarding me the Candace Morgan Intellectual Freedom Award. And so I actually gave a speech when I received that award at WLA's conference about the importance of collaboration of working together. We can't do this alone. We have to raise up our voices. We have to be loud when we're confronting these sorts of things.

And so, yeah, that, I think that gets to the heart of what you're talking about, finding those alliances. I had parents from the school who were talking to me and supporting me regularly. You know, there were a couple of teachers who were very, very helpful and supportive that I'm, I'm still so thankful for. And, you know, there were others who just didn't want to get involved, and I can respect that, but that wasn't necessarily great for me. It was a very stressful time, but I did have those allies.

I did also get therapy for those months, because it was just so profoundly stressful. But I remember talking with a therapist about, you know, all of these tools for finding ways to cope with this stress are tricky because it's like trying to put out a fire on yourself when you're still in the burning building.

[00:31:53] Sarah Peyton:

And this is a beautiful definition of self-compassion!

[00:31:56] Gavin Downing:

Right? You know, I needed to take those moments to make sure I wasn't on fire right now. I'll probably be on fire again in a moment, but I'm going to not be on fire in this moment.

[00:32:08] Roxy Manning:

Talking about the importance of allies, and also hearing what you said about other libraries saying, oh my gosh, this is happening to us, I'd love to hear from you, like, how is what's happening and what happened at your library fit into the larger picture of public libraries and book banning that's happening in the U. S. And why is this happening?

[00:32:27] Gavin Downing:

Oh my goodness. So, there are a lot of different possible reasons as to why it's happening now, but the big picture of why it happens, why people do this; it's not about protecting children, it's not about keeping them from seeing things, because if it was, the kids wouldn't be allowed cell phones. You can look things up on your cell phone that's far beyond anything that are in any of these books, right? It's about controlling who has the right to speak. Once you look at it through that lens, all the behavior we see around book challenges and book bans make a lot more sense.

My principal did not believe herself to be homophobic. In fact, for Pride Month that month because people were saying, you know, you're trying to ban three LGBTQ books, that's kind of homophobic. She didn't like hearing that. So for Pride Month, she went out in front of the school and she raised herself the ally flag in front of the school. Now, I have some thoughts on that, but the thing to keep in mind here is that people don't like to think they're being the bad guys. She didn't want to claim it was banning; "It's not a book ban. They can still get it from the public library." Well, not everyone has access to the public library. Not everyone has the budget to order from Amazon, right? The school library is there to provide the library experience for the students who go to that school. It's not meant to be a watered-down library that is for the lowest common denominator. It's meant to be a library, okay? It's just one that is focused on these students. And my principal, while she did not think of herself as being LGBTQ, the impression that I received was that she didn't approve of certain ways of being LGBTQ. *Jack of Hearts* has a student, a teenager, who is sex positive. Now, there's, his best friend is choosing to be celibate and not engage in sex. That's another one of the main characters. But, she had an issue with the fact that the main character chose to have sex with multiple partners, no romantic interest, just that. She did not like characters in these books who owned their sexuality. That was not something that she wanted.

[00:35:27] Sarah Peyton:

Do you have a sense that she represents sort of the U. S. voice?

[00:35:35] Gavin Downing:

She... she was not to my knowledge associated with like Moms for Liberty, or anything like that. However, this is where Moms for Liberty and things like that can be fairly pernicious. We know now from some public records requests and some emails that she was sending during that time that, for example, when she was upset at *All Boys Aren't Blue*, she sent an article talking about how bad it was to other people in the building and the district saying, look at what's in this book. The

article was from The Daily Caller, which is Tucker Carlson's news organization. It is a very biased, very right-wing conservative organization. And so, she was taking talking points from that because, my suspicion is, she was looking for things that were going to justify her viewpoint. And that's what she found.

[00:36:32] Sarah Peyton:

Oh, hang on just a second. So, if we're thinking about the U. S. as a whole... I loved what you said. You said it's a question of who gets to speak. Like, whose reality gets to be expressed.

[00:36:46] Gavin Downing:

Yes.

[00:36:47] Sarah Peyton:

And you had mentioned that *All Boys Aren't Blue*... Did you say that was the second, the second most?

[00:36:54] Gavin Downing:

Second most banned book in America, right now.

[00:36:56] Sarah Peyton:

What is the first most banned book right now?

[00:37:00] Gavin Downing:

Genderqueer: A Memoir, which is a beautiful, beautiful, very powerful book. It's by Maia Kobabe, and it's about the author's experience realizing that they are trans, non-binary, and asexual, with e/ir pronouns. It is a beautiful book. It is so illuminating and thought provoking. I love it to pieces. There's one panel that a lot of people take completely out of context. I'm not gonna describe it or anything here, but taking completely out of context, all by itself, some people think that the book is very different than what it actually is.

[00:37:53] Sarah Peyton:

It's a graphic novel.

[00:37:55] Gavin Downing:

It is a graphic novel. It's like comic books. It is an amazing, amazing read. I wouldn't recommend it for anyone, you know, less than about ninth or 10th grade, but for high schoolers, I think it is an absolutely phenomenal, incredible book. And, you know, there are plenty of eighth graders I would trust reading it as well. I considered it for the middle school when I was there and chose not to include it because I felt that it would be more, overall more distracting among some students than it would be healing for others. So that's why I made the decision I did. Part of this of course comes back to, you know, being a librarian and you have to balance all of these different factors when you were making your selection and building your collection.

[00:38:48] Sarah Peyton:

You've given us a little bit of a game plan. So, the first thing is, like, for librarians, what books are you selecting? The second thing is, being prepared. The third thing is, getting your union support. The fourth thing is, if that doesn't work, then there's involvement at higher levels and there's involvement with the media and that kind of outreach. Have we missed anything in the game plan?

[00:39:16] Gavin Downing:

Oh my goodness. I will say that when this was happening, the book challenge was like an extra full-time job.

[00:39:28] Sarah Peyton:

Therapy is part of the game plan, and having the beautiful support of a spouse.

[00:39:33] Gavin Downing:

Absolutely. I had friends who were willing to help out with housework, which was great. But I spent a lot of money eating out a lot because we just had to, you know, get food and didn't have time to cook. And it was... I will admit it was expensive, it was stressful. You know, therapy is not cheap. And it took a lot of my time, but I want to tell a brief story here that helped make it all worthwhile.

It was June. I knew I was moving to another school, but the Pride ally flag was out in front of the school. I didn't yet know what the decision was going to be, and it wasn't looking great. I was hiding a lot in my office. I was spending a lot of time blinds down in my office, door shut. I would come out for students. But, otherwise, because the library was right across the hall from the office, and I would just get glares all the time. And so I just was hiding out in my office a lot. One day, you know, before school, I always had students in there, and I was out for that. And one day, you know, the library's clearing, kids are going to classes, one young student sticks around at the doorway. He's the last one out. Someone who doesn't talk a lot. He was there a lot, but wasn't a big conversationalist or anything. But he said, "Mr. Downing, I wanted to thank you for always having such *great* books in the library." And he gave that emphasis. He looked around to make sure no one was watching, he raised his fist and he said, "Happy Pride." And he left to go to class. *That* moment made *everything* worthwhile. I would have done it a dozen more times to keep that young man feeling in that moment like he could be open with me like that.

[00:41:31] Roxy Manning:

Oh, thank you for sharing that story. This definitely really helps us center like who this is for, right? When we talk about whose voices get to be heard, it's also that young man's and other young folks. Yeah. One of the questions I want to change topics a little bit, but I'm really curious, like, is this just a U. S. phenomenon, the whole book banning thing, or is it happening internationally? Is it happening in other places?

[00:42:02] Gavin Downing:

We are seeing a rise in other countries as well, though not to the same degree. U. S. and Canada, Canada is picking it up the most. But it's definitely happening in England. It's definitely happening in Australia. I'm specifically aware of those locations outside the U. S. We are seeing an uptick. It's not to the same degree that we're seeing here in the U.S., where you have that organized political machine, like Moms for Liberty, that's really pushing that. But when you have a group, like Moms for Liberty, that is that well-funded political machine, you get other groups that start to do similar things. And so that's why I think we're seeing similar upticks in these other countries.

[00:42:56] Sarah Peyton:

And who is Kelly Jensen and how did you discover her work?

[00:43:01] Gavin Downing:

So Kelly Jensen is the reporter for Book Riot who focuses on the book challenges and book bans. She's been doing it for about four years, and that's about how long it's really started to ramp up, started about four years ago, low, low level. And it started really getting strong about the time that mine happened. I spoke with several other librarian friends of mine when this was all happening. And one of them said, talk to Kelly Jensen at Book Riot. And so I reached out to her and she said, yes, I'd be very interested to tell your story. She is absolutely tireless on reporting what's going on. I cannot say enough good things about her amazing work on this topic. She has been doing this now for several years, and if you want to know what is happening with book challenges, read her articles on Book Riot. She has her own mailing list as well. Follow her on Twitter, X, whatever you want to call it. You will learn so much about what is going on with these book challenges across the world, not just in the U.S. Yeah, that's her.

[00:44:17] Roxy Manning:

This is wonderful. We'll make sure that we link to some of her sites where our listeners can find her. And I'm also planning to put links to some of these titles that you've mentioned.

[00:44:28] Gavin Downing:

Absolutely. I'm also happy to share my response to the book challenge or any of the articles, including like the one with the speech I gave at WLA.

[00:44:39] Roxy Manning:

Oh, that would be lovely. Listeners, you will get to, to see all of these.

So you have been in this kind of, in some ways, a power down position as a librarian with the administration really coming after you, and then last fall you ran for school board in your area. And so this is something we're recommending to people to get involved politically. So what kind of insights would you have for others who are considering doing something like this themselves?

[00:45:05] Gavin Downing:

Oh, well, I was requested, actually, by the president of the teachers union for the district. Because of everything that happened, I got a lot more involved with Washington Library Association and also with my union. When I was at the Washington State union gathering last March, I met the president for the Federal Way Educators Union, and I also discovered that there weren't a lot of

librarians in the Federal Way District. A lot of them had been cut, and I did not like that. Our students deserve librarians. And so, when I was speaking with the union president about this, she said to me, have you considered running for school board? And it was something that my wife and I had discussed after everything that happened of maybe I might run at some point. And so I said, well, yeah, actually. And then I looked and discovered that there was an opening in the district that I was in; the person who was in that space was not running for re-election. And so I chose to run. My opponent is someone associated with a local group called Stand Up Federal Way, which You know, has tried to challenge and ban books in the Federal Way School District. And unfortunately, you know, we had a very low turnout and I did not get elected.

That said, I'm so glad I did run. I learned so much. I did a lot of doorbelling and door knocking. Oh my goodness. I got to meet a lot of amazing people, including a couple members of the school board who were running for re-election who were phenomenal. And they thankfully did get their seats back. And so we have some really amazing, amazing school board members in the Federal Way District. It's not something where I'm like depressed about the state of things or anything like that.

And I'm not done fighting to bring librarians back to the district. I'm working with WLA at the legislative level to see what we can do about that. They're funded at the state level. The state funds librarians for every single school, but then when the money gets to the district, the district gets to decide how to spend the money. Yeah. The same thing happens with actually funding for the libraries themselves. Back in 2018, they passed something that says that for the funding model, it's 20 dollars per student for library material specifically, with an extra like 5 dollars and 15 cents, I want to say, for ninth through 12th grade, to be adjusted for inflation as well, which is probably now about what, 32 bucks a student for the high school level. But again, the district has to decide how to spend that. So in my library, I get about 99 a student.

[00:47:55] Sarah Peyton:

Here we are coming right to the end. And so we want to make sure that people can stay tuned. I'm so inspired by, not just you running for school board, but also with you getting involved at the legislative level. What actions would you like our listeners to take? One of the lessons I'm taking away is that if I have a friend who's involved in book planning to make sure to feed them and clean their homes!

[00:48:21] Gavin Downing:

Oh my gosh! If you know of a librarian who's dealing with a book challenge, bring them casseroles! Seriously!

[00:48:29] Sarah Peyton:

But what other things would you like people to do?

[00:48:33] Gavin Downing:

Show up to school board meetings. Show up to school board meetings. If you believe in intellectual freedom, if you believe that students should be able to choose for themselves what

books to read, or maybe with their parents' assistance, that's between them and their parents, and not everyone else, show up to school board meetings. Because let me tell you, the bluest parts of the bluest states, the people who want to ban books are there. They're making their voices heard. I know of challenges happening in Seattle, Washington, in San Francisco, in New York, in Santa Cruz, California. You know, these are places where we often sort of assume they're not going to happen, and they're happening there. So show up to school board meetings. If you're not seeing anything, write letters, just making sure the board knows that you support libraries and librarians. Talk to your lawmakers at the state level. Follow local elections. Vote, in every election. These are the things that can make change happen.

[00:49:50] Roxy Manning:

Thank you! I hope every single person listening to this call at minimum votes in both their primaries and the general elections and especially educate themselves about what's happening at the local level. But I also want to thank you for being with us today, Gavin!

[00:50:08] Gavin Downing:

It was my pleasure! Thank you for having me!

[00:50:10] Roxy Manning:

You're welcome! And then, for our listeners, we will make sure that you, again, have all of the resources that Gavin mentioned, and we also invite you to support our work by going to our website, antiracistconversations.com, where you could learn how to purchase our books, how to have anti-racist conversations in the anti-racist heart, and you could learn about upcoming podcast guests, you could listen to this interview again and share it with everyone. Thank you very much again!