

RUBY BRIDGES

Testimony

Dear Members of Congress:

I am honored for this opportunity to speak on this very important subject. When I first heard about possible book bans, including the targeting of my books, my initial thought was to avoid responding altogether as I thought it didn't deserve more attention and the efforts would naturally subside. However as these bans have somehow gained even more momentum, I feel it is now important to speak up. I cannot understand why, why are we banning books? My books are written to bring people together. Why would they be banned? But the real question is, why are we banning books at all? Surely, we are better than this. We are the United States of America.

In every book I've written, I have purposely highlighted and lifted up those human beings, as Americans who were seeking the best version of our country like Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall who won this landmark case. As a six-year-old walking through the doors of this all-white elementary school in 1960, I wanted my readers to know, I did not walk alone. I was protected by dedicated federal marshals commissioned by a sitting President of the United States. I was nurtured and taught by a compassionate teacher, mentored by a world-renowned

child psychologist. All of whom were white by the way and mentioned in these very same books that some wish to ban. They became a part of my support system along with a supportive community, my village. My courageous family and friends. So, when I share my experiences, my story, in these books, I share a shared history – good, bad, and ugly.

As a six-year-old child, I had no idea I was taking a historic walk. My parents were sharecroppers, raised in rural Mississippi. Not activists. For them, education was a luxury they could not afford. They only knew that they wanted better for their own children. A mother that felt education would provide that better life. A father who was a decorated Korean War vet, was skeptical. Remembering his own experiences in a segregated branch of the military, he said he was always seen and treated as just another colored soldier, war hero or not. Needless to say, this historic walk put them at odds with one another. Even though this same walk helped to change the face of education in this country. And I, I became the poster child for the Civil Rights Movement. My father never lived to see the change this walk helped to promote.

As a six-year-old, I had so many questions. What happened? How did it happen to me? Why that school? Sadly, no one, including my parents could provide answers or they didn't want to. History happened and it was over. Being six, with limited capacity, I often wondered if it was all just a dream. How would I

ever understand my own place in history? This was a part of my identity, and yet no one around me was equipped to discuss it; or maybe they just didn't want to share this with me. I was only six. Let's face it, there was no Black History Month then, and the textbooks we used were obsolete then and they are still obsolete today. I learned the full impact of my own story at the age of 17 when a reporter showed up on my doorstep with the Norman Rockwell painting, which depicted my walk. Until that very moment, I thought my experience in 1960 was contained to my own neighborhood, in my community, on my street. I questioned if it really even mattered. Finally, I understood my role in history, and it didn't come from the textbooks used to teach me that history, unfortunately.

The truth is that rarely do children of color or immigrants see themselves in these textbooks we are forced to use. I write because I want them to understand the contributions their ancestors have made to our great country, whether that contribution was made as slaves or volunteers. My books are written to inspire a new generation to contribute to building this great country for indeed there is much work to be done. If we are going to have a conversation about banning books, then I say that conversation is long overdue. Let's have it, but it must include ALL books. If we are to ban books from being too truthful, then surely, we must ban those books that distort or omit the truth.

I do empathize with parents who are faced with answering questions that they do not feel equipped to answer. Remember, my parents once stood in their shoes. Even when my own grandson at seven, came to me with a book about the United States Presidents, their names and their faces asking, “Mom-mi, do you have to be white to be President?” As a grandparent, that truth was hard for me to look at. I had to be creative in my response while also being truthful, because my grandson needed to feel good about the person he sees in the mirror as well. My response, “No, you don’t. They’re waiting on you. You can be the first black President of the United States.” So, you see, I encourage parents and teachers to be creative, without lying of course because our children deserve the truth. The truth is pure. The truth is good. We all know the saying, “the truth shall set us free.”

As I stated in my 2014 TedTalk, teachers should be given the flexibility to teach. We must untie the hands of our very qualified educators. Books celebrate our shared history, and they should not be banned. The integrity of books and the history and stories within their pages must be embraced and preserved by all, for all. History is sacred and shouldn’t be changed or altered in any way.

In closing, I would like to say, the purpose of my books is to extend and expand education to children-all children no matter the color of their skin. I write to remind children that we should embrace both our truth and our progress. I write

to show them that we are truly better together than apart. In order to be the United States of America, to live up to our name, we must be united. Our babies – all of them- need to see themselves in our books particularly in school.

Representation doesn't just matter; it is vital. Especially in the pages of the books we teach from. When children read about President Dwight Eisenhower, they should also be able to read about that little six-year-old girl who made a difference during his presidency. That little girl was me, Ruby Bridges, and I'm proud of my story as are thousands and thousands of kids not just in this country, but around the world.

I thank you for your time.