



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“...That’s an interesting criterion for purging libraries. I await with interest the board’s views and policies about some of the other school library books: for instance, those about the separation of powers in the United States government, the conditions at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, and the integrity of the Florida election machinery.”

-David G. Winter, *New York Times* Letter to the Editor, June 17, 2006

I have been following the story of the Miami-Dade School Board’s decision to remove a children’s book about Cuba from the elementary school library. This book, which is called *Vamos a Cuba*, is apparently available in both Spanish and the English version, *A Visit to Cuba*.

The story was first reported in *The New York Times* on June 16, 2006, two days after the board voted (6 to 3) to remove it from the school libraries. A parent had complained that it gave an inaccurate idea of Cuba, since it portrayed “a life in Cuba that does not exist and omits a lot of facts.” Although two school district committees voted to keep the book, the parent appealed to the school board, who decided to remove it and other books in the series.

This ban was followed by a suit from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) the following week, which was then followed by an Amicus Brief filed by the Florida Libra-

ry Association (FLA). The president of the FLA, Sol Hirsch, explained their views by saying: “The price we pay for the right to free speech is tolerance for ideologies in opposition to our own...Instead of censorship, librarians advocate providing information representative of all sides of an issue” (Press release, July 8, 2006, FLA.org).

Then, on July 24, 2006, U.S. District Judge Alan S. Gold ruled in favor of the ACLU, saying that the book must stay on the shelves until the case goes to trial. As he said, the books are not required reading, but are optional, which “goes to the heart of the First Amendment issue” ([Herald Tribune](#) July 24, 2006).

I have to admit, I always find it exciting when there are heated discussions and lawsuits about books. Whether or not we realize it on a daily basis, written words – particularly in the form of a book – are powerful. In particular, words can conjure up strong feelings, as they ap-

parently have in this case. The parent who challenged the book originally, Juan Amador, is described in the June 16 *New York Times* article as a former political prisoner in Cuba who was offended by the contents of the book. His point is that the book omits critical information about Cuba and so it is misleading. It is easy to understand the passion of a parent who has had other experiences with a country, and I can sympathize. Over the years my children have brought home books that gave views I didn't always agree with. And over the years, I have certainly had discussions with them about topics that upset or anger me.

But the removal of a book is a huge step and one that shouldn't be taken lightly by anyone, no matter their view. It is not, as the Mr. Amador is quoted as saying: “...so simple just to take the book out of the shelves” (*Herald Tribune*). In

fact, it is dangerous, because the simple removal of one book will definitely lead to the simple removal of another and another and another.

It is much better for a parent or a school board or a librarian to expand a collection, not limit it. By doing this, children are allowed to read widely and eventually reach their own conclusions. And that, to my mind, is education.