

WB teen writes winning Bill of Rights essay

See editorial page for final Bill of Rights installment

By Deborah T. Kovsky
guest columnist

NEXT MONTH, 17-year-old Adam Belcuore will play the lead role in his school's fall production, "Flowers for Algernon." Adam is excited about the chance to challenge himself in such a demanding role, but if groups like the Freedom Council and the Citizens for Excellence in Education had their way, he would never have

that chance.

Despite their misleading names, the Freedom Council and the Citizens for Excellence in Education are part of a growing number of organizations advocating censorship. In the past decade, thousands of literary works have come under censors' fire. "Flowers for Algernon" is one such work, considered objectionable because of its portrayal of the developmentally disabled. Other works are being targeted for reasons ranging from the mention of divorce to the use of vulgarity to the promotion of secular humanism. As the list of

targeted books grows longer, the charges become more fanciful. At the rate censorship is spreading, there will soon be few books not under censors' attack.

Champions of free expression face a powerful opponent. The censorship movement, with its many branches and forms, is a very vocal minority and has enjoyed a rather frightening success rate. Still, those who recognize the literary merit even in controversial works are not helpless: They are supported by the First Amendment to the Constitution, which guarantees the freedom of expression for all individuals. Because this basic human liberty is so clearly protected, books like John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath" and Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman" still grace library shelves, accessible to the public — and at Adam's school the show will go on.

THIS IS JUST one example of the multitude of ways in which the Bill of Rights — the first 10 amendments to the U.S. Constitution — protects citizens. Many of the liberties ensured by the Bill of Rights are so basic

and essential that Americans take them for granted — they are, as Thomas Jefferson put it, "self-evident." Yet one has only to look at the history of a nation such as the Soviet Union to see what can happen when the most fundamental human rights are not safeguarded by law.

Amazingly enough, despite the reverence with which it is viewed today, the Bill of Rights almost didn't make it into the Constitution. At the Philadelphia Convention, where the Constitution was drafted, no mention of a bill of rights was made until the last few days. Although the Anti-Federalists — with both political and moral motivations — threw their considerable weight behind the proposed bill, it was too late to work it into the body of the Constitution. In order to win enough support to obtain the ratification of the new Constitution, James Madison and other Federalist leaders committed themselves to adding a bill of rights as a series of amendments once the Constitution went into effect. The 10 amendments that were eventually ratified came to be known as the Bill of Rights — and 200 years later,

Americans cannot imagine life without it.

UNLIKE OTHER aspects of the Constitution — such as the separation of governmental powers which seem to be remote and have little to do with most citizens, the Bill of Rights plays an important part in the everyday lives of all Americans. When the authorities search a suspected crack house, they must have a warrant, because the Fourth Amendment protects citizens against unreasonable search and seizure. When a suspect is arrested, he cannot be held indefinitely, because the Sixth Amendment ensures all citizens' right to be informed of the accusations against them and to a speedy and public trial. "I'll take the Fifth" has become a part of American jargon because of the great importance of the Fifth Amendment, which prohibits authorities from requiring a person to testify against himself. Even peaceful protests and marches against the government itself are protected under the First Amendment.

In no other country in the world do

citizens have as many freedoms as fiercely guarded as in the United States. The concepts of the Bill of Rights, radical in 1789, still mark the United States as unique today. The Bill of Rights' importance lies in its continuing relevance to American society and the need, as long as government exists, to protect the rights of the people from that government. The importance of the Bill of Rights is such that it would be felt more by its absence — in injustice, fear and the loss of liberty — than by the stability of its presence.

As one student who spent six years in Iraq remarked, "Americans all talk about how they have freedom. But you don't know what freedom is until you have to live without it." Deborah T. Kovsky, 16, a West Bloomfield resident, was first runner-up in an essay contest on the Bill of Rights sponsored by the Michigan Trial Lawyers Association and the Michigan Commission on the Bicentennial of the Constitution. She is a senior at Walled Lake Western High School, and her teacher is Aubrey Goldin.

Teens write about rights

Michigan students are clearly concerned about their rights, and many of them are just as clearly committed to taking action to protect them. That's the consensus of the Michigan Trial Lawyers Association and the Michigan Commission on the Bicentennial of the Constitution which together sponsored an essay contest on the Bill of Rights.

A field of 400 essayists was narrowed to group of 22 perused by the judges.

Top essayist was Julie Becker of Renaissance High School in Detroit with her entry "Is the Bill of Rights Relevant in 1991?" For her effort, she won the \$1,000 Lee Dramis Memorial Scholarship named after a leading Lansing trial lawyer and past president of the MTLA.

FIRST RUNNER-UP was Deborah Kovsky a West Bloomfield resident attending Western High

School in Walled Lake. Her essay, "Forming a More Perfect Union," earned her a \$500 MTLA scholarship and a second \$500 scholarship awarded to the best essay by an Oakland County student by the Oakland County Trial Lawyers Association.

Second runner-up was Pamela Karen Smith of Westland John Glenn with the essay, "The Voice of the American Citizen." Third runner-up was E. Stacy Parker of Troy High School, who wrote "Censorship 1991: Our Endangered Arts." Both Smith and Parker won \$500 MTLA college scholarships.

Receiving honorable mention for their entries from the Observer & Eccentric area were Darcey Rose O'Callaghan from Garden City High School and Andrea Zane Tawill of Livonia Churchill High School.

MTLA president Thomas H. Hay, who served as a judge.

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