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Community members had the right to protest Ayers' visit to school, but not to point of coercion

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An ongoing debate about free speech in Naperville has caused a lot of talk.

A few weeks ago Naperville North High School had offered an invitation to Bill Ayers, co-founder of the Weather Underground, to speak to a class of seniors. Anderson's Bookshop in Naperville also scheduled a book-signing event featuring Ayers the same night.

But a backlash from people who heard about the planned events compelled officials with Naperville Community School District 203 to withdraw the invitation to Ayers, who grew up in Glen Ellyn. Becky Anderson, co-owner of Anderson's Bookshop, said she feared for the safety of her employees and canceled the book-signing after receiving numerous threats.

In response to the controversy, Anderson's Bookshop held a forum Monday to address the issue of free speech. The event featured several panelists who discussed specific questions and answered concerns expressed by audience members.

The forum drew a standing-room-only crowd to the bookstore in downtown Naperville. Anderson said the goal of the event was to solicit a variety of opinions through a civil dialogue.

The moderator of the forum was Stephen Maynard Caliendo, associate professor of political science at North Central College in Naperville. Panelists were Steve Macek, associate professor of speech communication at North Central College; Keith Carlson, communication arts teacher and faculty adviser for the school newspaper at Naperville Central High School; Jane Barnes, president of the Naperville League of Women Voters; Celia Kokoris, the incoming editor-in-chief of the school newspaper at Naperville North High School; and Gary Bolt, deputy chief of the Naperville Police Department.

Each panelist addressed three specific issues:

1) Did the School District and Anderson's Bookshop do the right thing by canceling their scheduled

events with Ayers? Was free speech threatened?

2) What about this larger issue of freedom of speech: Should there be other limits? Who can speak, and who decides?

3) Does this set a precedent for restricting free speech? Could this lead to blacklisting or worse?

Most panelists believed District 203 officials were wrong to withdraw the invitation to Ayers. A Naperville North student said Kermit Eby, the history teacher who organized Ayers' visit to the school, received permission from both the school principal and district superintendent to host the event.

The panelists also believed that Anderson was within her right to cancel her event with Ayers due to concerns about the safety of her employees. However, Bolt said that Anderson wouldn't have needed to cancel the event had she notified the Police Department about the threats. Members of the department would have done everything possible to ensure a safe event, he said.

It was good that Anderson organized this forum to discuss free speech and the ramifications of this controversy. She had a large but cordial audience in her store, and people felt free to express their viewpoints.

The only change I would have made in the forum would be to include a panelist who opposed Ayers' scheduled visits to the school and bookstore. Despite the many hateful comments she received from people, I'm sure someone who objected to the events could be found who could express his or her opinion in a reasonable manner.

Before discussing my views on the forum, I must offer one caveat: I was only able to stay for the first round of questions, so some of my concerns may have been addressed after I left.

That being said, I was struck by two thoughts as the panelists and audience members spoke.

First, the people who opposed Ayers' scheduled visit to Naperville North represent the "public" in "public high school." They provide the revenue necessary to construct and maintain the school building; fund the salaries for staff members, teachers and administrators; and purchase supplies used in the classrooms. Without the public, there would be no public high school.

I don't think objections to the planned event were handled well at all. As some of the panelists said, opponents deprived students the opportunity to make up their own minds about Ayers and his activities in the 1960s and '70s.

I've been told by people that Ayers has disavowed his former group's use of violence to protest the Vietnam War. In a column I wrote a few weeks ago, I said that if he is sincere about repudiating his involvement in domestic terrorism, his presence at local schools shouldn't stir such opposition. That's because he has admitted he was wrong to use violence as his group did.

But all of that rests, as I indicated in my column, on Ayers' sincerity. And if he has been telling students that his decisions were wrong, he is sending a different message than he did years ago.

Despite his stated regrets, I'd still be very reluctant as a teacher to invite him into my classroom because I don't know what's in his heart. Rather, I'd invite a veteran journalist who covered the Weather Underground and/or a federal law enforcement agent who tracked members of this group to provide a context of what went on during this period of U.S. history.

However, it's not for me to decide who should be invited to Naperville North. Members of the public should have made their objections known and respected the decision of administrators. That's why the School District employs these people, so they can make such decisions.

On the other hand, community members have a right to express themselves on such matters given that their money makes the school possible. For some panelists to suggest that opponents don't have a say in what goes on in their school is misguided. Their right to free speech is no less significant than that of the students, teachers or administrators.

Community members crossed the line, though, in attempting to coerce the school and Anderson's Bookshop through intimidation. Once they threaten violence, they engage in an act of terrorism — the very thing that Ayers' group did.

In this way, opponents become the very thing that they're protesting. Now they're no better than Ayers, and their objections to his visits lose all meaning.

So to sum it all up:

Community members have a right to express their concerns over a scheduled appearance by Ayers, but not to the point of coercion. They must allow administrators to make this decision without any threats of violence. The high school seniors who wanted to attend Ayers' visit should be allowed to make up their own minds (isn't this what high school is all about?). Parents who objected to the event had the chance to keep their children from attending, and it should have been left at that.

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