

“It’s a Free Country”

OKC Bar Association Essay

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My mom has always told me “If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all.” I’ve recently learned that although this rule is polite, it contradicts the rights granted to me under the first amendment, which are arguably more important than having good manners. Moms don’t benefit from teaching their kids about the right to free speech. I’ve been grounded enough to know I haven’t earned that right just yet. The Founding Fathers, however, foresaw the need for certain protections. They thought about what brand new citizens would need protections in order to feel like their voice matters in a democracy. They had to consider what rights would be crucial to liberty then and in the future. The answers became the first and perhaps most important amendment. The First Amendment is there to protect “we the people” of America and is the cornerstone to democracy and the American way of living. Just a few of the important protections afforded by the first amendment include freedom from censorship, restriction of speech and press rights, unlike in other countries, the right to petition government when a citizen is unhappy with the state of government affairs, marches, and protests, and free religion. The first amendment protects all people from persecution, judgment and unconstitutional laws and rulings to protest peacefully or petition about. It is important mostly because many countries do not have these rights, especially the rights of free speech and press. The US Constitution states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people to peacefully assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

Expanding on this idea, it is clear that such countries have a dictative government most of the time. These dictators can and do arrest people who speak out against them or anything they

disagree with. Some countries even go as far as changing the press and or news channels and giving fake news and information to fit their desired message. For example, North Korea rarely allows outside journalists to even enter the country. Also, internet censorship is popular in quite a few countries whereas we are lucky enough to open our laptops or smartphones and google anything we wish to. We are very fortunate to be living in such a country where fake news is frowned upon and the real news is not only true but also critical information to know.

Finally, first amendment is important because it protects citizens from unconstitutional laws. Signing petitions for change are one way. One case where this worked was in the protest for better laws protecting the care of disabled children. This specific petition was started after the death, due to negligence from his father, of Quinten Wood. This petition received enough notice to become a bill that was passed and became the Quinten Douglas Wood Act of 2014. This act really improved the lives of many in Oklahoma because one woman started a petition over her brother's unfortunate situation. Another way that these rights from the first amendment help citizens to change unfair things in their communities is to peacefully assemble or protest. A few examples of some of the more popular protests are Women's Marches and LGBT equality protests.

To conclude these important points on who the First Amendment was made to protect, any American could simply look at the people around them. Everyone's rights are protected by the First Amendment throughout their everyday lives. While these rights allow group gatherings and protesting, they also allow for each individual to stand for their beliefs, Also these rights allow you to petition things and allow individuals to speak their mind in public and online as

long as what they're saying does not impact somebody else's rights. I had never given these protections much thought but now I realize that they are very crucial as an American. These protections are arguably the most important document to citizens in the United States.