“Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition,” as they say in the Monty Python shows. I certainly didn’t! Yet, at the apex of my career—after 37 successful years as an educator—I found myself in the bull’s eye of an official book challenge. When a parent filed a complaint against Isabel Allende’s The House of the Spirits, a work I teach to honors sophomore English students at Watauga High School in Boone, North Carolina, the inquisition began.

I fought this academic fight for you and for everyone who cares about intellectual freedom. I did not fight it alone. Students, parents, colleagues, community members, university faculty and students, organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English, and others rallied together. We won—although I am distressed to use terms such as battle—fight—win—lose, but I must, because that is the way it felt.

The story of this book challenge is lengthy and dramatic. The parent objected to “pornographic and torturous content” and attached to her complaint the excerpts to which she objected, which represent 1% of the book.

Four days after the parent filed her complaint and three school days before I was to begin teaching it, my month-long The House of the Spirits unit was unexpectedly put on hold. I was expected to create a challenging unit of equal value over the weekend!

Two committees, one in October and another in December, voted unanimously to retain the book fully in the honors sophomore curriculum. An appeal by the parent followed each committee decision. Intense media coverage went beyond our rural county to the national and international levels. The author, Isabel Allende, became involved in our struggle and wrote a letter to the Board of Education. Appalachian State University (ASU) held a Teach-In in support of the book. All the English teachers at Watauga High School received hate mail that triggered a criminal investigation. Huge Board of Education meetings packed the venues. I had a police escort at these meetings.

In February the location of the final BOE meeting, which would decide the fate of The House of the Spirits, was moved unexpectedly to the courthouse for safety reasons, as it can accommodate more people than the county building . . . and it has metal detectors.

The Board of Education’s final decision, to retain the book fully in the honors sophomore curriculum, was a split 3–2 vote. After five months of disruption, we could finally get back to the business of teaching.

The heart of this story belongs to the students, not to me. They are the true heroes! As three classes of sophomores were denied the right to read The House of the Spirits because the unit was put on hold, activism rose. As students who studied this work the previous school year learned of the struggle, their indignation was ignited. As future students realized they might also have their right to read taken away, the student movement grew.

The activism I saw in my students gives me immense hope for future years. The students are thoughtful, articulate, and persuasive. I know that this experience will inform the rest of their lives, and they will continue to put their intelligence, their hearts, and their actions into good works.

The “WHS Students’ Right to Read” Facebook page tells our story of student activism and parental and community support throughout this challenging process: https://www.facebook.com/WHS.Students.Right.To.Read

Students carried signs and wore blue t-shirts with the logo “Unlock The House of the Spirits in Watauga High School—Support our Right to Read” at all the Board of
Education meetings. Throughout the book challenge, students also wore their blue “Unlock” t-shirts to school as a visual support.

In our local papers, the Watauga Democrat and the High Country Press, my students posted comments to the multiple articles and to the nay-sayers. Their words were absolutely the most intelligent and articulate and thoughtful of anyone’s. For example, James wrote:

“Shall we protect our peers from the truth so that they may be blissfully ignorant? No, we should not, for intelligence is the power to build and rebuild, to take the past and bring it forth so that we know of such wrongdoings, in a way that does not corrupt but rather enlightens. Ignoring an event, or series of events, like those described in The House of the Spirits, does not erase them from history. Rather it only provides an opportunity for repetition. I do not feel corrupted in any way by this book. I am truly glad I read it and would suggest it to others who desire a powerful recollection of the truth.”

My students were on the panel at the Appalachian State University Teach-In. Renée, who was a junior then and had studied The House of the Spirits with me, gave a passionate speech. She said:

“The House of the Spirits is like a tapestry; there are main threads such as magical realism, family, and hope. If one does not see the whole tapestry or use it for its intended purpose, the point of the tapestry is missed entirely. This controversy helped me realize the need for The House of the Spirits and its essential truths to encourage free thinking. The House of the Spirits has challenged me, made me think, and connected me to a piece of literature on a deeper level. I will always support Mrs. Whitaker and the education she gave me, because it benefitted me greatly.”

Kauner, another of my students who read and studied The House of the Spirits, organized a petition for students to sign. It included these words: “We, the undersigned, pledge our steadfast support for the adoption of this book as well as for academic freedom of all public school educators in the State of North Carolina.”

He had very tight restrictions as to how he could handle this. He was allowed to set up a table in a corner of the high school commons area. He could not have any signage and could not speak to anyone or explain what the petition was. In only 30 minutes per morning over the course of a week, a total of 2 ½ hours, he garnered over 25% of the student body’s signatures. He spoke and presented his petition at the public comment Board of Education meeting.

Emily, one of my former students, is a college student at ASU. She is also the daughter of my principal. At the massive public comment Board of Education meeting, she signed up to speak and with incredible passion supported me and the book in front of the BOE and an auditorium filled with people. Her dad did not know she was planning to do that, although I know he was proud of her. And then a couple of weeks later on the day of the final Board of Education meeting, the one that would determine the fate of The House of the Spirits, Emily asked her folks for a ride to the meeting. She was sick with pneumonia and they advised her to stay home. Her response? OK then, I’ll walk! (She was there, but I’m pretty sure they gave her a ride!)
Emily’s words in support of me and of academic freedom are powerful:

“Ms. Whitaker uses her words as ammunition. They were her saving grace, enabling her to eventually prove to the school board and the community that she has the students’ best interests and intellectual growth at heart. The House of the Spirits …gives students a look at a world beyond our small town…beyond Boone, Watauga County, North Carolina, and the United States. She is able to positively affect her local community through situations like the book challenge. Even further, she is able to utilize her experiences to educate students on the power of words and to show that they are essential in creating change.”

Another former student, Emma, organized a Read-In at Watauga High School. The morning of the final Board of Education meeting to make a final decision on The House of the Spirits, students donned their blue “Unlock the House” t-shirts, gathered in the commons area of the high school before school began, and read their copies of The House of the Spirits.

Spencer, a student at the Read-In, said, “I support the book because I think it helps students who live in places where the type of violence we’ve read about in the book isn’t very apparent. A lot of students didn’t even know about the military coup in Chile and the end of democracy there before reading this book. I think books like this are necessary to be able to open eyes to the reality of the world and not just their immediate surroundings.”

Students attended and spoke at the American Civil Liberties Union press conference that was held the afternoon of the final Board of Education meeting. Max, one of my then-current students who was denied the right to study The House of the Spirits, although he read it on his own, said this:

“In the modern world, the only access most kids have to violence, like rape and torture, is exploited and exerted through sensationalized media. Education is where we can change our path, and learn to view these events, past, present, and future, through an educational lens that allows us to learn and grow from the experiences that others have been forced to endure.

As long as we can live safe and peaceful lives in a developed country, the least we can do is learn to respect and honor those who are less fortunate. We cannot close the blinds to real history, and real events, and real pain just because it makes us uncomfortable. If reading about rape and torture is unnerving, imagine what it must be like to live it. It’s a scary thought, but sadly one that too many people are familiar with.

If this generation wants to make a mark on the world as one that is inclusive and supportive and one that reaches out and holds up those who suffer, if we want to be a generation that reaches the highest standard, we need to open our minds and discover the real world we’re living in. And we need teachers and authors and everyone in between to support our youth in that journey. We need The House of the Spirits at Watauga High School.”

—Max, a student

At the final BOE meeting Patrick, who was the student representative on the Board of Education and also the president of our student body, spoke passionately. His final words to the members of the Board of Education were:

“Do not make us have to fight for our education!!”


NCTE Intellectual Freedom Center

NCTE offers advice, helpful documents, and other support to teachers faced with challenges to texts (e.g., literary works, films and videos, drama productions) or teaching methods used in their classrooms and schools.

Access resources and learn more on the NCTE Intellectual Freedom Center at http://www.ncte.org/action/anti-censorship