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ND celebrities promote First Amendment

North Dakota celebrities are lending their voices to support the First Amendment in a campaign being rolled out this month by the North Dakota Newspaper Association.

The “My Freedoms” campaign is designed to draw attention to freedoms that most Americans appear to strongly support even while they frequently and often vigorously dispute how they should be applied, said Steve Andrist, executive director of NDNA.

“The 86 newspaper members of NDNA see the First Amendment as Constitutional bedrock,” Andrist said. “They are often taken for granted, but guaranteed freedoms are what sets the United States apart from and above every other country on the globe.”

The First Amendment, adopted nearly 230 years ago by citizens who demanded a guarantee of their basic freedoms, protects freedom of speech, press, religion, assembly and petition.

Without the First Amendment, religious minorities could be persecuted, the government might well establish a national religion, protesters could be silenced, the press could not criticize government, and citizens could not mobilize for social change, according to the Freedom Forum Institute’s First Amendment Center.

On that basis, NDNA enlisted the support of high profile North Dakota natives to speak about the importance, of America’s Constitutional freedoms. Ads featuring five notable North Dakotans are being rolled out this month, and more will be added in the coming months.

“The First Amendment protects freedom of religion, speech, press, petition and assembly,” says Bismarck native Dave St. Peter, president and CEO of the Minnesota Twins, in the ad in which he’s featured. “We need them all every day, every month, every year.”

Also featured are twins Monique Lamoureux-Davidson and Jocelyn Lamoureux-Modano of Grand Forks, stars of the 2018 U.S. women’s hockey team that

won the Olympic gold medal.

“Our freedom of speech gives us an opportunity to use our platform to be a voice on issues important to us,” they say, “for gender equity, diversity and inclusion, and equality.”

The celebrity “My Freedoms” campaign complements another program being conducted by the NDNA Education Foundation with funding from Humanities North Dakota. In that program, most newspapers in the state are running weekly columns about various aspects of the Constitution, written by constitutional scholar David Adler.

Others featured in the first My Freedoms roll-out are:

-- Nashville recording artists Kendra and Krista Slaubaugh, Hazen, ND, natives who perform as Tigirlily, who say: Our freedom of speech is important to us because as songwriters and artists we can create freely and wholeheartedly put our truth into our music. Without free speech, there would be no art.”

-- Bismarck native Cara Mund who was crowned Miss America in 2018, and says: “My right to free speech ensures that I can call out problems when I see them and speak about injustice anywhere without fear of retribution.”

-- Theodore Roosevelt, presented by Medora reprinter Joe Wiegand, who quotes our 26th president as saying, “Free speech, exercised both individually and through a free press, is a necessity in a country in which the people themselves are free.”

When the U.S. Constitution was signed on Sept. 17, 1787, it did not contain the essential freedoms now outlined in the Bill of Rights, according to the Freedom Forum. However, after vigorous debate, the Bill of Rights was adopted. The first freedoms guaranteed in this historic document were articulated in the 45 words written by James Madison that we have come to know as the First Amendment.

More from the Freedom Forum Institute's First Amendment Center:

The Bill of Rights — the first 10 amendments to the Constitution — went into effect on Dec. 15, 1791, when the state of Virginia ratified it, giving the bill the majority of ratifying states required to protect citizens from the power of the federal government.

The First Amendment ensures that “if there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein,” as Justice Robert Jackson wrote in the 1943 case *West Virginia v. Barnette*.

And as Justice William Brennan wrote in *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan* in 1964, the First Amendment provides that “debate on public issues ... [should be] ... uninhibited, robust, and wide-open.”

However, Americans vigorously dispute the application of the First Amendment.

Most people believe in the right to free speech, but debate whether it should cover flag-burning, hard-core rap and heavy-metal lyrics, tobacco advertising, hate speech, pornography, nude dancing, solicitation and various forms of symbolic speech. Many would agree to limiting some forms of free expression, as seen in the First Amendment Center's State of the First Amendment survey reports.

Most people, at some level, recognize the necessity of religious liberty and toleration, but some balk when a religious tenet of a minority religion conflicts with a generally applicable law or with their own religious faith. Many Americans see the need to separate the state from the church to some extent, but decry the banning of school-sponsored prayer from public schools and the removal of the Ten Commandments from public buildings.

Further, courts wrestle daily with First Amendment controversies and constitutional clashes, as evidenced by the free-press vs. fair-trial debate and the dilemma of First Amendment liberty principles vs. the equality values of the 14th Amendment.

Such difficulties are the price of freedom of speech and religion in a tolerant, open society.