

## 12<sup>TH</sup> GRADE SECOND PLACE WINNER: KATHRYN MOLDAWER

“Importance of Free Speech” by Kathryn Moldawer, Gainesville High School  
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I began this essay many hours and many violent outbursts of frustration ago, and it read very differently than it does now. It was still about Free Speech, the Freedom of Assembly, to be exact, but its tone and content were not what you are reading now. It was a formal essay, very reminiscent of the five paragraph, FCAT style ones I spent most of my education writing, about the Freedom to Assemble in regard to the notion of strength in numbers; I discussed the history of the First Amendment in the context of the American Revolution, examined its role in the social movements of the 1960's, analyzed its importance today, and even included a really great ant analogy. But before I could conclude and successfully tie a pretty bow around my, to put it mildly, thoughtless essay where I merely regurgitated everything I had learned about Free Speech in my thirteen years of formal schooling, so I could go to bed early, I began to wonder, and care, if my words were really going anywhere.

I mean, when looking back at the American Revolution or the Civil Rights Movement, my words seemed unnecessary and redundant. Isn't it already obvious that the freedom of assembly is important? Is it necessary that I articulate that its secured in the First Amendment, and that it yielded just about every social movement? Isn't this common knowledge? I have learned all about free speech in school, yet I wonder, with all this “knowledge,” why am I struggling so much to write this essay? I know it is for the Florida Free Speech Forum, and I know it has to be about free speech. This should be easy then, right? But, to be honest, I don't know what the Florida Free Speech Forum expects, I hardly know what it is. And now, even worse, I have slowly recognized that I probably don't know as much about free speech as I initially thought. In fact, now that I am being perfectly honest, its importance is something I have acknowledged only recently, when learning about the Free Speech Movement at Berkley in the 1960's in my Humanities class.

But before I apologize for my ignorance, I must ask if you can blame me, or my generation, for not knowing or thinking so much about the First Amendment? I think sometimes this is all lost on us kids, who have known nothing but the ability, even the encouragement, to express ourselves. My generation, probably more than any other, has enjoyed the liberties of free speech. Since an early age we have been encouraged to say what we feel, often at the expense of manners, which probably limited the freedom of expression of previous generations, and society has often covertly rewarded us for it. Thus, for my culture, freedom of speech is a natural right in the truest sense of the term. But because we have never had to fight for it, we probably don't understand its importance. In fact, my generation has grown to focus on only the extremities of expression and how far we can push its limits. Modern issues of free speech now involve whether students can boast inflammatory comments on their t-shirts or marginally insult public figures at a forum without being tased.

Don't get me wrong, it's not that all this isn't important. I recognize that the ability to be outrageous in our expression is necessary to a free society and that censorship, despite any good intentions, can have detrimental effects. Human beings hardly believe something simply because it is mandated from some higher source, like government or religion. Rather, as inquisitive beings, we have to explore every point of view on a given issue before formulating our own opinions. I think my generation understands this. It is why, since childhood, we have been encouraged to express ourselves and push societal standards. Maybe, however, we have only forgotten the other use of free speech. We forget that our speech can be utilized not only as a means of personal expression, but also to check the actions of our government.

After all, in a political system with such an extensive system of checks and balances, involving impeachments, vetoes, judicial oversights, and other fancy political terms, we must not forget who has the greatest check of all. We must remember that government is not its own independent entity. It, in itself, has no rights and is solely the apparatus of the people it represents. It is, in fact, truly "of the people, by the people, for the people." Our relationship with the government can be described as a symbiotic one. In return for the political din that the government yields to us, the din that seems to promise us order and security, we, in turn, give the government legitimacy. If we don't like what it does, we reserve the right to express our grievances, and if they are not redressed, to overthrow the entire system. This first part, the right to express our grievances, is why the second part has never happened. It is our freedom of speech, and it really is so important. It is why America's first revolution was its last. It promises the success of our government. Because we the people can assemble, protest, and make our voices heard, we can truly foster change. Sometimes this notion is lost in the cynicism and apathy of my generation, where adding the "Causes" application to one's Facebook constitutes activism, but it isn't gone forever. Hey, if I, who in my humble beginnings knew nothing of the Florida Free Speech Forum and who even hardly recognized the importance of Free Speech, can come to this conclusion by writing an essay, there must still be hope for us yet. And if not, don't worry, I can always turn in my other, FCAT style, essay -- ant analogy included.