What Is Banned Books Week? With Ernest Romero, Mt. SAC Librarian

Episode 162

00:00:00 **Ernest**

The freedom to read is essentially the freedom to learn. The whole point is that we have the right to express whatever we want. Now, how you take it as an individual, that's fine, but doesn't mean that you have to censor what they just said.

00:00:15 **Ernest**

You can agree or disagree, but at the end, we want to make sure that this is available to everybody and you can make your own decision on this particular book or this particular information in general.

00:00:31 **Christina**

Hi, I'm Christina Barsi.

00:00:32 **Sun**

And I'm Sun Ezzell, and you're listening to the Magic Mountie Podcast.

00:00:36 **Christina**

Our mission is to find ways to keep your ear to the ground, so to speak - by bringing to you the activities and events you may not have time to attend, the resources on campus you might want to know more about, the interesting things your colleagues are creating, and the many ways we can continue to better help and guide our students.

00:00:53 **Sun**

We bring to you the voices of Mt. SAC, from the classroom to completion.

00:00:57 **Speaker 1**

And I know I'm going to achieve my goals, and I know people here are going to help me to do it.

00:01:02 **Speaker 2**

She is a sociology major and she's transferring to Cal Pomona! Psychology major, English major ...

00:01:08 **Sun**

From transforming part-time into full-time.

00:01:11 **Speaker 1**

I really liked the time that we spent with Julie about how to write a CV and cover letter.

00:01:17 **Christina**

Or just finding time to soak in the campus.

00:01:20 **Speaker 1**

To think of the natural environment around us as a library.

00:01:23 **Christina**

We want to keep you informed and connected to all things Mt. SAC, but most importantly, we want to keep you connected with each other. I'm Christina Barsi, Mt. SAC alumni, and producer of this podcast.

00:01:34 **Sun**

And I'm Sun Ezzell, Learning Assistance Faculty, and Professional Learning Academy Coordinator.

00:01:39 **Christina**

And this is the Magic Mounty Podcast.

00:01:44 **Sun**

Welcome back to the Magic Mountie Podcast, I'm your host, Sun Ezzell. In this week's episode, I talk with Mt. SAC librarian, Ernest Romero about Banned Books Week, the freedom to read, and the importance of libraries and free access to information to democracy.

00:01:58 **Sun**

Even though Banned Books Week comes just once a year, you can find resources celebrating the freedom to read all year long in the show notes. Grab your favorite book, find a cozy spot, and enjoy.

00:02:10 **Sun**

Welcome back to the Magic Mountie Podcast. This is your host, Sun Ezzell, and I'm so excited to be here today with Ernest Romero from the Mt. SAC Library. Welcome to the podcast.

00:02:26 **Ernest**

Ah, it's great to be here. Thank you, Sun.

00:02:28 **Sun**

So, I invited you to join us today to tell us a little bit about Banned Book Week, but maybe first, do you want to tell our listeners a little bit about yourself?

00:02:38 **Ernest**

Oh, sure, sure. My name's Ernest Romero. I'm one of the adjunct librarians at Mt. SAC Library. Been here for about five years - love it. And I am a big advocate for not just books, but information in general. I mean, we're librarians, that's kind of what we delve in a little bit.

00:02:56 **Ernest**

So, I like the fact that this information is free to everyone. You can go to your public library, your school library - all of this is just available to you, and it's one of the great perks of this thing called the First Amendment. And we'll talk a little bit about that later.

00:03:10 **Ernest**

But I just wanted to say that I'm a huge fan of making sure that information is available to everybody and that questions can get answered at the library. So, please, please, we're here for you. We're here for the students, and we want to make sure that you guys get as much information from us as possible.

00:03:29 **Ernest**

So, please, please, if you see us at the desk, feel free to approach us. We're friendly. I swear, we won't bite.

00:03:38 **Sun**

When I'm sharing with students about the library, I always say talking with you is the best part of the librarian's job. And it sounds like that's true.

00:03:47 **Ernest**

Yes, and we want to speak to you, we want to know more about you guys. So, it can be intimidating to ask a question, but I mean, that's what we're here for, and we want to make sure you ask us and we give you the best information we can give you.

00:04:00 **Sun**

Wonderful. So, I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about Banned Book Week. What is Banned Book Week? Why does it exist?

00:04:08 **Ernest**

So, Banned Books Week is essentially a yearly celebration of books. The intellectual freedom and the fact that we don't want censorship dictating what we read, what we can talk about, and bringing up these conversations that actually build on our education, what we believe in, and the right to our First Amendment, rights to just say what we need to say.

00:04:32 **Ernest**

This is what Banned Books Week encompasses overall. And essentially, it gets people talking. It starts discussion, conversation, debate. These books, they actually have like an impactful notion on students' lives, what we teach our students, just literacy in general.

00:04:50 **Ernest**

A lot of this stuff is being censored, especially now, is actually showing right now that ALA or American Library Association said that this is the year in which we've had the most challenge or banned books in essentially all time, with 729 challenges in libraries, schools, and university materials.

00:05:13 **Ernest**

It's a significant jump. Just last year, it was only 156 challenges, and then the year before that was actually, only 377. So, just based on these numbers alone, in two years of previous, it still didn't match up with what we did as far as challenges this year.

00:05:31 **Ernest**

So, it's quite a bit - I believe these challenges are not going to go down anytime soon given the political environment we're in right now. But I mean, our job as keepers of this intellectual freedom and essentially, advocates for avoiding censorship, we want to make sure that this is brought to the attention of students, faculty, that we need to have these discussions.

00:05:56 **Ernest**

These books are not specifically terrible. In fact, they can actually teach a lot of lessons. And we want to make sure diversity and inclusion is involved in students' lives now more than ever. So, this is kind of what Banned Books Week is all about.

00:06:12 **Sun**

Thank you so much. So, what are some of the events that are happening at the Mt. SAC Library that folks can get involved in?

00:06:21 **Ernest**

Oh, well, so at this time, we do have a promotional event, we call it the Banned Books Week tournament. Essentially, we have 16 books that are frequently banned or challenged. Anything ranging from 50 Shades of Gray to Harry Potter, for instance, Go Ask Alice. We have Fahrenheit 451, Beloved, 13 Reasons Why, The Great Gatsby - all of these have different notions and different things that make them challenged.

00:06:52 **Ernest**

They could be sexually explicit, they could be part of the LGBTQIA community. They have to do with critical race theory, profanity. It could be obscene, indoctrine kids. I mean, there's a lot of things that are involved in these kinds of books, but these are all things that we should know and actually speak about.

00:07:12 **Ernest**

If we don't speak about them, we're not going to know about them, we're not going to research them; why is this happening? Why is this happening now? And they bring up topics for us as students, faculty, and so on, to understand what can we do to make change? How is this going to get better? How can we make it better?

00:07:33 **Ernest**

So, it's super important that we read these books and bring them to the attention of the people. But we do have this tournament and essentially, this week-to-week, you're going to be voting on these 16 books. Right now, we're down to eight. You're welcome to go to our library website, mt.sac.edu/library. And on the front top corner, you'll see it says, "Banned Books Week Tournament."

00:07:59 **Ernest**

And right there, you'll be able to click the link and vote for your favorite books, our banned books. And take a look at the list and maybe you want to come to the library and actually check them out. We have them available and we want to make sure that the students start taking an interest in these types of books. So, essentially, it's our take on March Madness, but library style with books.

00:08:22 **Sun**

That's a great way to get people involved. And I think it can be really like shocking to find out that a book that you have read is a banned book somewhere. And then that leads to wanting to find out more; "Why would people ban this book that I love or that I remember from my childhood, or that we read in my English class?"

00:08:41 **Ernest**

Exactly. Exactly. And so, in many cases, some of this is required reading. You know, these are books that you see on a regular basis, and it's just like I can't believe this is banned. Like The Great Gatsby, at the time, especially the sexual explicity, the manner in which Gatsby was, and his attitude, and his rigor - all of that stuff kind of took into especially at that time period, and made it a banned book, a censored book.

00:09:08 **Ernest**

So, it's something that we read on a regular basis. In fact, working in public libraries for a while, you see that this book that's 60-years-old is still quite popular and checks out very regularly. So, yet for some reason, it's still on this listing of banned books.

00:09:27 **Sun**

I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about the importance of freedom to read.

00:09:34 **Ernest**

Of course, of course. So, as long as we have books, they continue to ban and challenge stuff in the country, the world, everywhere. But the motivations for banning books have varied from one thing to another. But the whole point is that we should have the right to express whatever we want.

00:09:57 **Ernest**

Now, how you take it as an individual, that's fine, but doesn't mean that you have to censor what they just said. You can agree or disagree, but at the end, we want to make sure that this is available to everybody and you can make your own decision on this particular book or this particular information in general. Because it's not just books - although we're focusing on books here, it's all information.

00:10:23 **Ernest**

We should be able to decipher is this good information, bad information? Do I want to absorb this information or use this information?

00:10:30 **Ernest**

But if we don't have it available, we can't make that decision. The freedom to read is essentially the freedom to learn, to understand, to query, to contradict, to debate. It's so many things all at once, this freedom to read. Some reasons, you might find illogical, but someone might find them logical.

00:10:50 **Ernest**

We want to make sure that this First Amendment right to information is, like I said, available to everyone; students, everybody. It's something that this country was built on, and little by little, pieces of it are getting taken away from us. And we want to make sure that we still can hold onto this foundation of our democracy.

00:11:14 **Ernest**

One of the fears that we have, and unfortunately realities, is not just political world, but in general, I'll give you some statistics. The actual challenges that initiate start from parents - 39% at this time and 24% is patrons, like you and me.

00:11:36 **Ernest**

A lot of the school libraries in which these challenges take place is the majority. 44% of the challenge books actually come from school libraries. 37% come from public libraries. 18% come from other schools. And then only 1% actually come from the academic universities, for instance, because we're trying to encourage a freedom to read, avoiding of censorship.

00:12:01 **Ernest**

But you'll notice that other things besides parents and patrons, boards and administrations are becoming more and more prevalent with 18%, political and religious groups are 10%. Like for instance, 1% only are coming from students. Students want to hear and read these books. They want to make sure that this information's available because it's important to them, and it's important to everybody, actually.

00:12:26 **Ernest**

Now, by censoring, we are not helping our community. We're dividing our community. We want to make sure that all of this stuff is available to the public and they can make their own decision.

00:12:41 **Sun**

Listening to you now is making me think about how many students - I hear from so many students that one of the things they love about coming to community college, about being at Mt. SAC is the opportunity to get to know and make friends with, and learn about people who have different life experiences, different beliefs, different paths than they themselves have.

00:13:02 **Sun**

And that seems like a really powerful part of the freedom to read as well, to learn about folks who have different life experiences, different cultures, different languages than we do.

00:13:15 **Ernest**

Exactly. And it's a shame that it's not more evident, especially this is more of a personal matter; but it seems like as children, we take it for granted. This fact that we're, especially in California, we have this hodgepodge of, of different cultures, ethnicities, races, beliefs, and so on, and so forth. It's all here. You see it day-to-day. And essentially, you're learning about them without even realizing it.

00:13:44 **Ernest**

And so, books can provide you with a little more information. I know that if I have a question and I want to look it up, I have it available to me right here in my backyard, I call the library. So, it's nice to have that resource that you can depend on and that brings people together, essentially.

00:14:08 **Ernest**

We see students of all races, ethnicities, and so on, and they're on the same table, sharing the same paper, reading the same books, and they're discussing the same things. Although they might come from different backgrounds, that's what's bringing us together and giving all of these different ideas of what could be or what should be.

00:14:32 **Ernest**

It's nice to see, and we see it every day. And like I said, sometimes, we take it for granted, but it's there and we see it, and we want to make sure that our future children and so on will actually be able to do the same thing. But if we continue censoring, that might not be the case because essentially, you're dividing us now. You're not trying to bring the conversation or debate or understanding. You're kind of closing us off as individuals by censoring materials, information, and so on.

00:15:08 **Sun**

As you were sharing, I was thinking about there aren't that many spaces. And today, a society where folks from all walks of life can come together and access resources for free, and libraries provide that.

00:15:23 **Ernest**

Exactly. We have Banned Books Week, we have this tournament. It's going very well, and we want to make sure students know about it and start the discussion. Come to our board. We have a nice display in there. We also have banned books and a display there with different banned books you can read, check out, and they're there and available to you.

00:15:44 **Ernest**

You don't have to go searching, you don't have to ask a librarian. It's right there in the display. Pick up one, give it a try, and take it home, and see what you think. Go ahead and vote on your favorite banned books and see who wins at the very end. Just have fun with it. You know, start discussions. Maybe start a book club on banned books for instance.

00:16:03 **Ernest**

That's happening more and more often where people are taking these books that are somewhat challenged and having discussions about them. Why is this being banned? You know, why is it so challenged and starting the conversation.

00:16:18 **Ernest**

So, it's nice. These are all different ideas you can do. And this is just our idea. We like participation from our students and we think that this little tournament kind of gets this discussion talking about banned books and censorship.

00:16:36 **Sun**

Thank you so much. And we'll include the link in the show notes so folks can access that easily.

00:16:41 **Ernest**

Besides this, like I said before, we have a lot of different resources here at the library. Take a look at some of our library workshops from citations to developing research topics, evaluating books, finding evaluating articles, demystifying scholarly articles, APA basics, and so on - they're all available to you. Some of them, you could just do online, on a self-paced like workshop.

00:17:07 **Ernest**

Or you can come in person and talk to us and let us know like maybe you have specific questions, finding or evaluating scholarly materials. But we're here for you and we want to make sure that you as students are not afraid to let us know that you have a question. We want to be able to help you as best we can.

00:17:24 **Sun**

Great. Thank you so much. And we'll include a link to the Mt. SAC Library in the show notes as well.

00:17:29 **Ernest**

Awesome. I really appreciate it, Sun.

00:17:32 **Sun**

Thank you so much for joining to talk with us today. And thank you for making the library such a welcoming space for folks, and providing so many opportunities for folks to explore the resources that the library offers, and for all your awesome work. On behalf of the Mt. SAC community, thank you, Ernest.

00:17:51 **Ernest**

No, thank you, Sun, I appreciate it.

00:17:55 **Christina**

Thank you for listening to the Magic Mountie Podcast. And don't forget to share your favorite episodes.