

# Liberty

ACLU OF NORTH CAROLINA NEWSLETTER SUMMER 2025

WE THE  
PEOPLE  
DARE  
TO CREATE  
A MORE  
PERFECT  
UNION



## Rooted in Resilience: Celebrating 60 Years of the ACLU of NC

Sixty years ago, a group of passionate community members came together to found the ACLU of North Carolina to defend civil rights and liberties all across the state. The 1965 “Speaker Ban” spurred this effort, which prohibited so-called “radicals” from speaking at state universities. The ACLU-NC successfully challenged the law in court as a violation of the First Amendment. At the time, there were

about 300 dues-paying ACLU members in the state making up a small but mighty force in the work to protect our freedom to express ourselves.

Today, ACLU-NC has a growing staff of nearly 30 headquartered in Durham, a city rich in civil rights history, from the 1943 Durham Manifesto for Civil Rights to the sit-ins of the 1960s, and Black economic organizing on Parrish Street. From the humble beginnings of our affiliate, we now have over 30,000

members. The organization has gone on to play a leading role in legal and advocacy campaigns over the past 60 years.

We are exceedingly proud of these accomplishments including:

- Protecting freedom of speech on public school campuses across the state
- Ending a cohabitation ban that relied on antiquated norms of marriage in 2006

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**ACLU**  
North Carolina

# Liberty

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## From the Executive Director



## More Than Ever

60th anniversaries are typically acknowledged by diamonds. Diamonds possess unique traits including unmatched hardness, high strength, and high reflectivity. As members of the North Carolina ACLU team and I have dug deeply into our archives, I find myself confronted by the fact that this organization, over the 60 years of our existence, has truly embodied

the characteristics of a diamond. In examining our history we have remarkable insight into our present. Through the archival materials we witness the tireless and inspiring efforts of our ACLU predecessors who met the challenges of their time with resolve and persistence, which is particularly impactful as face the seemingly relentless efforts of our current anti-civil liberties forces trying to curtail our most critical freedoms. It's been a busy six months as we respond to and evaluate the impacts of Trump's administration in our backyard. We recognize that every era has brought its own challenges, and this moment is no different in its complexity and urgency. Still, in the broader arc of our affiliate's 60-year history, what has remained constant is our commitment to community, through every shift, struggle, and turning point.

Since our last newsletter, we've informed our community of developments in the legislature, translated legal jargon into accessible language that informs North Carolinians of how policymakers' decisions will impact them, and offered actions they can take to speak truth to power. We've engaged directly with decisionmakers to advance legislation that benefits the people and worked to block or mitigate harmful legislation that threatens our communities. And, we've taken legal action when necessary to curtail threats to our civil liberties. On all fronts, we are responding to multi-pronged attacks on the core values of democracy and progressive ideals of inclusion. I won't deny the challenges we are facing, nor the sense of overwhelm and exhaustion as those in power manipulate the very systems meant to protect us. But we cannot lose hope and give up. Now more than ever, we need to come together as community to envision and build the inclusive future we deserve. We're so glad you are with us. Your voice, your presence, and commitment matter now more than ever. ■

Executive Director  
ACLU of North Carolina



# Organizing Introduces CLAPBack for NC

**O**ur current political moment has shown a need for tried-and-true approaches to community engagement via education. Our burgeoning Organizing team is responding to that need with CLAPback for NC! The name of this initiative serves two purposes: CLAP stands for Civil Liberties Action Program, and we are encouraging North Carolina to respond, or clapback, to threats against our civil liberties. This virtual, module-based participatory curriculum began on March 13th and wrapped up just as we were finalizing this newsletter for distribution.

The curriculum covered political education and advocacy for a cohort of 36 aspiring civil rights leaders in Guilford, Wake, and Mecklenburg counties. Within the three-month program, participants have developed a better understanding of the ACLU of NC and opportunities for civic engagement, and various strategies as well as tactics for advocacy and organizing. Through this process, participants have become conduits for community resources, developing a stronger understanding of local and state government. In so doing, these leaders have refined the skills to transform their communities and advocate for change locally and within the legislature on a variety of ACLU issue areas, including immigrant rights, criminal justice, reproductive freedom, and LGBTQIA justice. This cohort has built skills that will usher in and sustain long term change toward a more perfect North Carolina. CLAPback for NC proves the imperative value of political education in restoring power to the people. We look forward to seeing what these community members can do. Stay in touch for opportunities to join the next cohort on our website and social media! ■

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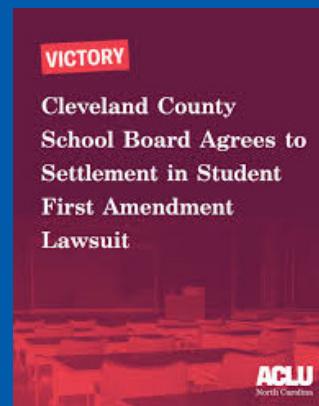


## Legal Update (Cleveland County School Win)

In a decisive victory for student free speech and LGBTQ+ visibility, the ACLU of North Carolina has secured a settlement allowing a banned trivia game at Shelby High School to move forward, marking a powerful stand against censorship in Cleveland County Schools. The game acknowledged LGBTQ+ individuals who have made significant contributions to American society. In partnership with Charles Johnson of Robinson, Bradshaw & Hinson, PA, we filed a lawsuit in February alleging that the Cleveland County Board of Education (“Board”) violated students’ rights under the First Amendment and the Equal Access Act.

The Board had prohibited a student group from playing a Jeopardy-style quiz game, deeming the activity “indecent.” Under the terms of the settlement, the student group was allowed to play the game with students who return a parent’s permission slip, and the Board has issued a public apology and acknowledgement of the importance of the First Amendment in public schools. Specifically, the Board recognized “that student speech plays an essential role in fostering a vibrant, respectful, and inclusive educational environment,” and apologized for “the delay in allowing this student to exercise her

constitutional rights.” ACLU- NC is committed to protecting the rights of all individuals, particularly those who are systemically targeted, including the LGBTQ+ community. ■



# Standing in Solidarity with Immigrant Communities



We were joined by advocates from across North Carolina gathered at the NC General Assembly on May 21, 2025, to stand in solidarity with immigrant communities and demand an end to anti-immigrant legislation.

# Freedom to Be Campaign

The heightened attacks on civil liberties always demonstrate a disproportionate impact on our most vulnerable communities. The contemporary targeting of transgender people of all ages is a dismaying theme of our current political moment that confirms this pattern. Transgender people commonly face a wide variety of discriminatory barriers to full equality, including interpersonal and institutional challenges in employment, housing, and health care. They also experience challenges in having their gender identity acknowledged and respected (like being extended the simple courtesy of being addressed by the proper pronoun or name). Much of the discrimination transgender people face mirrors that experienced by lesbian, gay and bisexual people, but is often more pervasive or severe. Recently, there has been an uptick in legislation that polices bathroom use, compels teachers to misgender their students, and restricts or completely prohibits access to gender-affirming treatment for transgender youth. In North Carolina, this attack on trans youth comes in the form of HB 519, legislation that revokes the ability for minors to provide consent to certain types of health care services without parent permission. Research shows that when minors are forced to seek parental permission to access mental health services, they are dramatically less likely to seek care.

As a result of widespread discrimination in schools, in the workplace, and stigmatization within their communities, trans people of all ages experience significantly higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation than other demographics. The ACLU of NC continues to champion the right of transgender individuals to live with dignity, respect, and to have their basic needs met, including the right to joy and fulfillment. This past March, the ACLU of North Carolina completed a year-long Freedom to Be project that uplifts the voices of transgender and nonbinary youth who call North Carolina home.

Based on interviews with youth in local communities and partnership with local organizations, the ACLU of NC produced 5 short animations, along with a children's book, that highlight what gives them strength, purpose, and joy. Trans kids are often spoken for and rarely have their own voices heard. This project is a powerful example of the ACLU of NC's broader narrative change work—centering the lived experiences of trans and nonbinary kids, challenging



Top picture: Characters from the ACLU of NC's animated series, "Freedom to Be". Bottom picture: Communications Strategist, Acacia Cadogan reading "Freedom to Be," a powerful children's book celebrating trans kids' joy, strength, and resilience.

harmful rhetoric, and creating space for trans kids to be seen, heard and celebrated on their own terms. For more information and to view the series visit [acluofnc.org/freedomtobe](http://acluofnc.org/freedomtobe). ■

# Firewall for Freedom



Amid the firehose of attacks on civil rights and civil liberties aimed at all of us by the Trump administration, we've launched "Firewall for Freedom", an initiative to provide a roadmap of how we can all work together at the state level to defend our communities. We know from experience of his past administration and the brutal developments of his first six months in office that a Trump presidency means a firehose of policies and practices that threaten our democracy and civil liberties. We have already seen the concerted efforts to erode personal freedoms via mass deportations without due process, dismantlement of critical governmental offices, and enforcement of policies designed to weaken civil rights protections and democratic institutions. The Trump Administration has demonstrated an intent to fulfill his campaign promises and the goals of Project 2025 to severely restrict bodily autonomy, target and isolate our immigrant and trans communities, and to all but eradicate our freedoms of speech and protest.

Our mission remains consistent and unwavering. We will continue to challenge any initiative that aims to take away our rights. The Firewall for Freedom is all of us — including

organizations, community members, businesses, and elected government leaders who are committed to protecting the rights of all North Carolinians against an aggressive anti-civil rights and civil liberties agenda. We know that the work to fight against both federal and state level threats to our freedoms will happen at this hyper-local level and the ACLU-NC is committed to this fight. Even in legislatures and city councils where certain viewpoints are in the minority, individual elected officials can wield significant influence. We urge them to stand alongside impacted community members, bear witness to abuses, and speak out. This will be vital to pushing back on the xenophobia, racism, and bigotry that we have unfortunately seen in far too many of our communities.

"Firewall for Freedom" draws from the past to protect our future. This is not the first time our democracy has been threatened by those entrusted with the highest offices in our nation, and we will draw on the ACLU of NC's robust 60-year history to meet this administration head on and protect our rights.

Visit <https://www.acluofnorthcarolina.org/en/firewall> for more information. ■

# Celebrating 60 Years of the ACLU of NC

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- Leading the legal fight to overturn the state's same-sex marriage ban, securing a 2014 federal court ruling that declared the ban unconstitutional.
- Raising the age of juvenile jurisdiction, reducing the number of children who have been pipelined into prisons (2014).
- Ending coercive prayer practices that pressured members of the public to join in prayers that were overwhelmingly reflective of a single religion in Rowan County in 2018.
- Challenging voter suppression and informing the public of the stakes of local and national elections; you can look to our recent efforts during and following the 2024 general election to ensure that all North Carolinians had the tools and opportunity to exercise their right to vote, and in our vocal advocacy in support of upholding the outcome of the NC Supreme Court race.
- Advocating for an incarcerated transgender woman's right to adequate medical care.
- Advocating for the rights of unhoused individuals by challenging discriminatory legislation across North Carolina, including efforts to overturn targeted ordinances in Greensboro (2023), defending the rights of journalists covering protests (2021) and demonstrators supporting unhoused communities in Asheville (2023).
- Reforming policies in Alamance County that caused countless people to remain in jail simply because they couldn't afford bail.

- Securing a ruling at the North Carolina Supreme Court that people in same-sex relationships were also eligible for domestic violence protection orders (2020).
- Advocating for incarcerated people who faced extraordinary health risks during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Expanding access to lifesaving treatment for hepatitis C for thousands of incarcerated people.
- Ending a discriminatory dress code at a public charter school that did not permit girls to wear pants (2022).

As our membership has grown over the last sixty years, so too have challenges to democracy and the sacred civil rights and liberties that are foundational to any democratic republic.

Once again, we are seeing targeted attacks on minoritized communities, including brutal anti-transgender legislation that specifically targets children and bodily autonomy, anti-immigrant initiatives that make our communities significantly less safe, and racist legislation that undoes all Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives in the public sector. History is repeating itself, and the bad actors are learning from their losses in the past to tighten their grip on our freedoms and on our lives.

Defending free speech on campus is just as critical and necessary today as it was in 1965. Our predecessors knew that upholding the right to speak, especially in a learning environment, is a precious pillar of our democracy, and we are once again being called to confront threats to that right. Our ongoing support of student and community

protestors is a prime example of our broader commitment to free expression, especially in educational spaces. You will likely recall a wave of student protests for Palestine that swept across the nation—youth at a variety of institutions organized to make their voices heard. At UNC Chapel Hill, some protesters were forcibly removed by law enforcement, arrested, and banned from campus. Earlier this year, we, along with EmancipateNC and Muslim Advocates, filed a lawsuit challenging these actions. We have asked the court to require UNC to lift the lifetime bans imposed on our clients and to prohibit the University from imposing such bans in the future without providing adequate due process.

In this issue, we celebrate our work and legacy and invite you all to join us. We hope you are ready to contribute to six more decades of work to defend North Carolina. ■

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North Carolina

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## BUILDING THE WORLD WE WANT TO SEE

The ACLU of North Carolina uses an integrated advocacy approach to defend and advance civil rights and civil liberties in our state. Our team of litigation, lobbying, organizing, communications, and administrative professionals work across teams and with community partners to earn victories on some of today's most vital issues.

Learn more and support our work at  
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