

How Free Speech Leads to Change

By Santos “Sam” Rosas (He/They)

Freedom of speech is the right to express your opinions and thoughts without fear of government oppression or censorship. It is believed that the right to freedom of speech dates back to ancient Greece. During this time, freedom of speech, or what they called “parrhesia” was a fundamental part of the democracy in Athens. All Athenians including leaders, writers, philosophers, and citizens could freely express their opinions without fear of punishment in most settings. In the United States, the right to freedom of speech is also a fundamental part of our democracy and is protected for the most part in our constitution. But freedom of speech means much more to me than a document written over 200 years ago. Free speech allows me to protest for what I believe is right. It also allows me to share my experiences and perspective about being a minority in America. The first amendment also gives me the right to create groups that provide safe spaces and foster the idea of change and acceptance for students. So for me, freedom of speech means creating change for those that are oppressed. Members of marginalized communities have helped give the first amendment and free speech a whole new meaning. There are many events and stories in America that show this new meaning of freedom of speech leading and contributing to change.

In recent years we have seen a lot of protests and civic participation in our country. It is thanks to free speech that protects the right to express our views through protesting. Famous American protests and movements like the suffrage movement, the March on Washington, the Stonewall Inn Riots, the Delano Grape Strike, the Women’s March, the Black Lives Matter

Movement, the Dakota Access Pipeline protest, and so many more would not happen without the first amendment protecting freedom of speech. These famous acts of civic activism have changed history. Famous American activists like Dolores Huertas helped lead the Delano Grape Strike with Cesar Chavez and were both important voices in the Chicano Movement. Her notable acts of civic engagement would not have been possible if our country did not protect our right to protest and freely speak. One of her famous quotes states that “Every moment is an organizing opportunity, every person a potential activist, every minute a chance to change the world.” Every day that freedom of speech is protected by the first amendment every day we can advocate for change. Every time that I go to a protest, sign petitions, speak at school board meetings, or simply just repost something on Instagram about an important issue, I think about Dolores Huertas and this quote.

For many years in America, media, and what was taught in the classroom were always eurocentric. It always focused on the majority of the population and what they wanted in the media and in education. Members of marginalized groups such as people of color, women, immigrants, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, people with disabilities, and members of religions other than Christianity and their experiences, perspectives, and history were unheard and untold. We were given a limited perspective which caused us to be ignorant of what issues these people faced. Thanks to the internet and many people who want to make media and education more inclusive, marginalized groups have a chance to write and share their own narratives and experiences. Our society has an opportunity to become more informed and aware of issues like racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, harassment, and so many other issues so that change can be made. Movements like the Me too movement was an important moment in history

where many people mainly women talked about their experiences with sexual harassment and abuse. Though this movement did not stop sexual harassment and abuse from happening it brought more awareness to the topic. This led to people taking the necessary steps to help give victims of sexual mistreatment the support and justice they need. As well as big businesses and educational institutions providing the training and knowledge to try to prevent sexual harassment in work and educational settings. Tarana Burke the founder of the Me Too movement has a quote that states “There are so many different people doing amazing work across the country that I, in my capacity, definitely want to lift up, because they don't get lifted up that often.” It takes a lot of courage to speak out about issues like harassment and in some countries, people would be persecuted by their own governments. But it is because our country protects our right to freedom of speech that we can shed light on issues like this.

Freedom of speech means creating change for others through speaking and expressing your views, however creating a safe environment or space can contribute to change. When like-minded people are brought together they are more heard and feel safer in the environment they are in. Clubs like Gender Sexuality Alliances, NAACPs, Multicultural Clubs, or POC Student Unions all help create safe spaces in schools. Students who are a part of marginalized groups often experience the most discrimination during the school day. It is great that students are organizing and leading these types of organizations. Students expressing to their school administrators that there is a need for these clubs in their schools is a part of free speech. In 1984, Congress passed the Equal Access Act which states that public schools that receive federal funding can not deny students the right to organize clubs or conduct meetings because of religious, political, or other types of speech that occur at these meetings. This act has helped

prevent censorship from school administration towards student expression and speech. It is great that students are able to exercise their right to freedom of speech in schools. These clubs have helped organize and create a safer environment for all students in schools. Students and young people are some of our most passionate voices and will help lead our country to change. So it is important that all schools foster and welcome the idea of free speech. Gender Sexuality Alliance or GSA is a club that provides support for students in the LGBTQIA+ community. This kind of club also focuses on creating a safe and accepting space in schools. For some students who experience homophobia and transphobia in school, a GSA could bring so much change to school. American Senator Tammy Baldwin famous for being the first openly queer woman elected to Congress said in a quote that “There will not be a magic day when we wake up and it's now okay to express ourselves publicly. We make that day by doing things publicly until it's simply the way things are.” Though clubs like GSAs do not stop discrimination from happening it is a step in the right direction to progress. Without the first amendment and freedom of speech clubs like this would not be possible in schools.

In conclusion, when asked what freedom of speech means to me of course while looking at how freedom of speech has been expressed in the past and looked at how it affects my life every day. As a gay Asian and Latinx person here in America, I am no stranger to oppression and the feeling of being silenced. I know how important it is to speak freely as that is one of the reasons my family immigrated to this country. So to me, freedom of speech means creating change and giving those that are oppressed a voice. Free speech and the first amendment give us the to protest for progress. It also allows us to share our experiences and perspectives in this country. As well as creating safe spaces that provide support for minorities and contribute to

change. These three points show how freedom of speech contributes to change and the betterment of marginalized groups. Now more than ever I feel that freedom of speech is so important in order to make things better. That is what freedom of speech means to me.

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