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Celebrating the most American of freedoms

BY KEN PAULSON

Director
Free Speech Center
at Middle Tennessee State University

The 56 men who signed the Declaration of Independence knew what they were getting into. As we celebrate the 4th of July 245 years later with flags and fireworks, it's easy to forget that these patriots risked death to give a new nation life.

If you've never read the Declaration of Independence in its entirety, this is a good time to do that. More than two centuries later, it's still a good read. These rebels, who would be accused of treason by Great Britain, wrote the document in a reasoned manner, attempting to convey to the world that their cause was a just one.

At its most basic, it's a demand for a divorce, with one party explaining why this marriage can't be saved. What's fascinating, though, is how the list of complaints about the king of England not only cited justification for the break-up, but also telegraphed the

principles the new nation would insist upon in establishing its own governance.

The entire document was a bold statement, speaking truth to power. As it established its own future, this new nation would have to find a way to guarantee free speech, particularly in regard to criticizing government.

The Declaration of Independence lists more than two-dozen examples of why the king "was unfit to be the ruler of a free people." The new United States of America would need to create a check on those who abused their power. That would come from a free press.

Much of the Declaration is devoted to examples of the king ignoring the colonies' needs and maintaining a stranglehold on new legislation to address those needs. Clearly, the United States would have to guarantee petition and assembly.

Memorably, the Declaration states that all men are endowed by their "Creator" with certain

"unalienable rights." This was an acknowledgement of a Higher Power without a specific reference to any religion. This new nation would go on to guarantee freedom of faith.

Freedom of speech, press and religion. The rights of petition and assembly. Today, we see all five nestled together in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. It took a war for independence and 17 years, but those aspirations became the cornerstone for a young and vibrant country.

Fast forward to the 21st century. A new survey of citizens around the globe by legal public-policy center Justitia has assessed how citizens in 33 countries feel about freedom of speech. It found that most citizens in most countries feel free speech is important and positive, but they waver when presented with scenarios in which free speech offends others or hampers society.

In order, Norway, Denmark, the U.S. and Sweden top the list: Citizens of these nations say they

are steadfast in their support of free speech. At the bottom of the list: Tunisia, Kenya, Egypt and Pakistan.

In a telling passage, Justitia quotes free-speech expert and Columbia University President Lee Bollinger as saying the U.S. is "the most speech-protective of any nation on earth, now or throughout history." The report also notes that a 2015 Pew research study determined that no nation in the world was more supportive of free speech and a free press than the U.S.

At our best – and not without lapses – we walk that talk.

In 1776, our founders published a Declaration of Independence, but also a declaration of intent. Those early Americans sought "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" by creating a nation founded on freedom. But those freedoms must never be taken for granted, and our collective vigilance is essential.

On the most American of holidays, let's be sure to celebrate the most American of freedoms.

'Sometimes miracles happen': YBPA sends thanks for successful return of 'Street Dance'

By Cheryl Irish-Butera – president; Dotty Riordan – vice-president; Steve Zastrow – treasurer; Mark Butera – secretary; Tim Adamson – Town of Porter liaison; and YBPA board of directors members Catherine Stella, Melissa Kudel, Quain Weber, Stephanie Cattarin, Stephen Kennedy

After 15 months of isolation due to the pandemic, miraculously the Youngstown Business & Professional Association was able to hold our 11th annual "Here Comes Summer Street Dance & Car Cruise." It was held on June 17 (having been rescheduled from 2020).

Were people ever ready to get out and dance in the street? The amazing Thurman Brother's Band performed from 6-10 p.m. and the dancers never stopped dancing.

Even though the pony rides and bounce house were canceled due to COVID-19 guidance, our YBPA board and staff members created a "Children's Corner" in its place. There were hula-hoops, beach balls, chalk walk, beach shells, even two baby goats providing a mini "petting zoo," and yoga for kids provided by Brenda Zechmeister. The kids loved it! We thank Melissa Kudel and Jodee Riordan and their staff volunteers

for putting together this fun event in less than a couple of weeks.

A special shout-out to the mayor and village trustees for giving the approval for the dance to take place. And as well, we so appreciated the help of the Youngstown Volunteer Fire Co. and the Youngstown Chief of Police H. James Sutor for securing the streets with both fire trucks and police cars. Even Sheriff Michael Filicetti brought his classic police car and he participated in our annual car cruise.

Speaking of the car cruise, Albert McFadyen, Dennis Ketch and Tim Adamson (our car cruise guides) got the word out big time! We had at least 50 cars that night – most ever! On the street, we had Rebecca Poletti's Mangia Cakes ice cream sandwiches; the Youngstown Lions gave away free popcorn; The Historical Society held a raffle of beautiful baskets; and the Old Fort Niagara Post Theater project had an information table.

New to Youngstown, the Hill of Beans Coffee Stop was open for business, sharing its glamorous porch for everyone who stopped

by. There was the Lewiston Porter Youth Football vendor table with Katie Hoyle; the Youngstown Free Library sold freezer pops and bottled water; Patrick Harden, owner of the new Hardened Tattoo Parlor, was available for meeting our visitors; newly opened Sister & Brother Clothing Apparel was on the street showing off their products for purchase with owners Lisa and Mark Leffler; the Youngstown Garden Club was present selling plants and herbs; and Body Mind & Soul Center owners Lynn Bahringer and Jenny Rose were kind enough to make T-shirts with "Youngstown Street Dance 2021." That was a first!

YBPA had a table with a bubble machine and new signage (thanks to Stephanie Cattarin) with our 50/50 split winner donating her winnings back to the YBPA to help offset the expenses of the night. The two major foodies were the Ontario House (aka The Jug) with Barb and Mike Costello, and The Village Diner with Cathy Pasquantino and her staff serving up lots of tasty treats. These two businesses have been welcoming street dance attendees for every year since we

started in 2010. We thank them both, especially since most food vendors were unable to participate due to lack of staff – a common problem since the pandemic hit.

More shout-outs go out to Catherine Stella, who organized the vendors, finalized the insurance forms and provided a street map, which was a monumental job in just a few weeks' time; Youngstown's Susan Geissler, who opened her studio for all to view and enjoy; and, finally, the team from Niagara Frontier Publications who helped promote our event both before and after, as well as being an advocate for the YBPA.

The YBPA is a group of volunteers – no paid staff. We volunteer our time and energy to try to make our little corner of the world a safe and fun place to enjoy life. This yearly street dance is a cooperative effort of many people who are like-minded and care about Youngstown and the Town of Porter.

YBPA thanks everyone for participating and we'll see you all next year!

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