Chisa Uyeki [00:00:00]:

When we're living our truth, when we're being our authentic selves, that's what is going to bring us the most happiness. That's what is going to serve our communities. That is what is going to make the world a better place.

Chisa Uyeki [00:00:16]:

Welcome to the Mount San Antonio College Podcast. I'm Chisa Uyeki, a Mount SAC professor and librarian, and I'm pleased to be your host for this season. Our goal is to keep you connected to our campus by bringing you the activities and events you may not have time to attend to share the interesting things our colleagues are creating and innovative ways they are supporting and connecting with Mount SAC students. Join me as we explore Mount SAC. Thank you for joining us. I'm so glad to be able to share this episode with you. Today we'll explore the importance of of the freedom to read, the power of books, and the damage that censorship causes. We get to hear from a few students and you'll join me for a conversation with Mike Curato, the author of the graphic novel Flamer, which has been the target of coordinated censorship efforts.

Chisa Uyeki [00:01:17]:

And finally, Lessa Kanani’opua Pelayo-Lozada, director of Glendale Library Arts and Culture, will talk about book banning in the US providing her perspective as the 2022-2023 President of the American Library Association.

Brandon Rubicaba [00:01:40]:

My name is Brandon Rubicaba, and going into the event, I didn't know what to expect. I got a very vague description of it from a friend. And so when I realized that it was like talking to an author about the banned books, I was really excited because I just have always loved the topic of why books are banned and how that's dangerous and why we need to learn these stories about oppressed minorities, you know what I mean, in these communities. And it was just really exciting to get to know the author before reading the book. And I'm so excited to come home and read it tonight. So I'm really excited.

Kiara [00:02:20]:

My name is Kiara. Mine kind of follows along the same thing.

Kiara [00:02:20]:

I did not know what to expect coming in. I did not know the author was going to be here. It was kind of interesting to see, like, his perspective of his book being banned, you know, because I think we hear a lot from all of us who support the books, but not the authors themselves. So it was really nice to actually honestly get to know him as well because he talked a lot about his backstory and as I'm like skimming through the book, I can actually see what he's talking about. And, and even when he talked about X Men. And you can see that he put it in his book, which I really liked because I also love X Men. But it was really nice to get to know the author and find more about or read about a banned book and know more and why it's important. And it makes me want to look for more banned books and see, hey, what else can I learn? Because it doesn't make sense to me why these books are banned.

Kiara [00:03:04]:

But yeah, it was a really good event. I would come again.

Gibby [00:03:26]:

Hi, I'm Gibby. My pronouns are he, him, they, them. And I thought this event was very amazing the way it pointed out all the societal issues and stuff that's going on right now. And I can't wait to get home and read this book because it seems so inspiring and I hope to get know more about the author.

Nathan [00:03:26]:

Hi, my name is Nathan. My pronouns are he, they. And I'm very excited to read more about this book because I feel like it has so much that it will bring to this book and to know more about this author as well. I think I'm more very interested in knowing more about like these kind of gay books too, since I'm very exploring more into these kinds kind of genre books as well and slowly getting more back into reading as well. So I'm very looking forward to reading it and bringing what this author will bring to us and to the world.

Jimmy Smith [00:03:28]:

My name is Jimmy Smith. For me, I felt a little bit seen with what I have read up to this point. And it's also, you know, part of the reason, like I'm a foreign language major here is to make sure that not only are people like, seen and heard, but I want to do my part to make sure people are understood. And this book makes me feel understood a little bit too from, you know, of course, everybody's life is different, but I see parts of my own within this book and reflected in ways that I didn't think I would ever hear anybody else like, reflect them.

Jimmy Smith [00:04:38]:

And for that and many other reasons, I do like this book and I recommend everybody to read it. I want younger folks who are struggling to be able to read this and know that I think they're doing all right, you know, and I want them to keep going.

Chisa Uyeki [00:04:56]:

So you mentioned that this was a book that you wrote in part because it was a book that you would have liked to have had. Were there books when you were Aidan's age that you saw yourself reflected in?

Mike Curato [00:05:07]:

I don't really remember reading a book and saying, that's me. There were definitely books that Maybe had some universal themes that resonated with me, but, yeah, I mean, I never read a book with a queer character when I was a kid. I didn't read a book featuring a mixed race Asian person. Yeah. And I know that's very niche, but I just always felt very different than everyone else. It seemed like most other people had a story that they could identify with. At least that was my perception. I think as I get older, I discover, like, oh, a lot of people feel left out of the conversation in many ways.

Mike Curato [00:05:49]:

And so that's why I love that we're diving into more and more diverse books, and I hope that we continue to create a diverse collection for people. There's so many untold stories.

Chisa Uyeki [00:06:04]:

So I'm a little bit older than you, but I'm also mixed race Asian, and I can remember being little and it was a huge deal just to find a doll with black hair. It was so exciting. And I had very few because I had a bunch that had blonde hair, but just something like that really stuck in my head. So seeing characters now and hearing stories now that I can relate to is so important. So I appreciate the work that you're doing. Can you tell me some about what you have heard from readers who've related to Aidan's experience?

Mike Curato [00:06:41]:

I think part of what's been so validating about hearing from readers is when someone does have that moment of, like, oh, my God, I just saw myself for the first time in a book. And, like, I've never felt this way before, and I didn't realize how powerful that is. And so that's, like, really reaffirming to me that it's like, okay, I just spent all this time and, you know, a lot of sweat and tears, like, making this thing. And so. And sometimes I'll have a really meaningful piece of feedback from, you know, someone who struggles with suicidal ideation. And those are really the most important readers to me. I mean, that's really at the heart of what this book is about, is suicide prevention. And to know that it has helped at least some people, then that's made everything worthwhile.

Chisa Uyeki [00:07:31]:

So I've been so troubled over the last couple of years by all of the anti LGBTQ legislation. Like, in the pit of my stomach, I just. When I hear about a new law passing or regulation going into place, I think kids are going to die because of that. So I know Jarrett Krosoczka's quote, which is on your book, says, this book will save lives. I totally agree. I think it's some folks May feel like that's hyperbole. How is a book going to save someone's life? And you've said it's suicide prevention. Did you have it in your head that that would be where the book would end up when you started it?

Mike Curato [00:08:12]:

Yes, actually, because I've often thought about my own suicidal ideation as a teenager, and it's kind of scary to play the what if? Game, But I just wanted to help people that I know are out there struggling with the same thing that I was. And so it. I think it does make a difference when you hear someone else say, like, I've been through this, you know, and I understand, you know, and sometimes just hearing that can make a huge difference, and you feel a little less alone in the world and a little less like there's something wrong with you. And more like, okay, this is an experience that I'm having that a lot of other people have had. And I think. And I hope that that's what can make a difference sometimes. Yeah.

Chisa Uyeki [00:09:00]:

When you were creating Flamer, did you expect it to be banned?

Mike Curato [00:09:05]:

You know, I was maybe worried about a little pushback. There's some strong language in the book, and there are, like, very brief. I would just call them maybe sexual situations. There's no sex in the book. And so it's like, okay, maybe. I don't know, like, maybe some librarians might raise an eyebrow. I don't. I don't know how it's gonna be received.

Mike Curato [00:09:29]:

And then it was a year of no complaints. The only complaint I saw, I saw one comment online, and it was someone saying, like, oh, strong language. But it's realistic language, and there's nothing. I didn't put anything in the book that I didn't experience as a teenager. So what I wasn't expecting was this huge censorship movement. I mean, that it's also politically motivated. I was not expecting to be swept up in something quite like this.

Chisa Uyeki [00:10:02]:

I'm glad you mentioned that. It's a movement. I think that that's one thing that's really changed recently with banned books, is that it's a coordinated effort by a small group of people, some of whom have not seen or read the books before that are being put on lists and then en masse being banned. So I think that's important, particularly as a librarian, because librarians support parents. Right. To engage with their kids about what they read and what they don't read, but not to engage with it for other people. I think that's the big thing that is so wrong about the banning of books. So in the book, one of the camp counselors, I think maybe it's Ted, says, you're doing all right, Aiden.

Chisa Uyeki [00:10:46]:

You'll figure it all out on your own time. Just keep going. I found that reaffirming for my just reading that. I was like, oh, that I needed to hear it when I was reading it. I'm wondering if you had someone in your life as a teenager who encouraged you in a similar way.

Mike Curato [00:11:02]:

Yeah, I think something I don't get to talk about much is how I was a scout when I was younger and I actually had a very positive experience in scouting, and I made some friends and I had some mentors in scouting. And so it wasn't just one person. I think. I think there were, you know, a bunch of people, both like, my peers and my elders, who helped me really build my confidence at a time when it was, like, really lacking. And even though, like, Aiden, I was struggling when I was at summer camp, I was also surrounded by so much support. So, yeah, I can't name one person because there were many. And I think that's a difference that community can make. And my community is, like, really important to me.

Mike Curato [00:11:52]:

And, you know, my chosen family, we gotta have each other's backs. Right? So I hope that message comes through also.

Chisa Uyeki [00:12:01]:

So I wanted to ask you to talk about your reaction to the book being challenged and banned. And especially when you're thinking about young folks who aren't able to access the book, who you maybe wrote it for.

Mike Curato [00:12:15]:

I mean, that is what keeps me up at night. That is the most disturbing part of all of this, is that readers who are being denied access to these books are probably the ones who need them the most. Maybe they live in a community that they don't feel supported by. Maybe they're not getting support at home. Maybe if they had a book to let them know that they deserve to be here, it could make things a little more bearable. I just remember feeling so trapped when I was a teenager. Like, there was no escape from this reality. I couldn't see beyond my middle school, and I couldn't see beyond my house and my town.

Mike Curato [00:13:02]:

And so I just. I hope. I hope. I hope that these folks are finding a way to connect with others and get the support that they need. I have hope. I have some hope because I'm queer, I think, and it's part of queer history, right? We haven't been supported by the community at large. And we, you know, we have had to hide and support each other secretly. And it's not Right.

Mike Curato [00:13:31]:

It's not right that people have to live that way, but just feel like if our predecessors could do it, I guess that's my message, too, to those readers, is you can get through it, too.

Chisa Uyeki [00:13:44]:

So my final question is, if you have words of encouragement that you could share with Mount Sac students, what would that be?

Mike Curato [00:13:51]:

Some of the best advice my editor gave me about writing, which I think can really be applied to life in general. I was having trouble writing a different book, and it was my second book, felt harder to write than my first book, which was surprising to me. And my editor, Laura Godwin, said, well, the thing that made the first book successful is that it was true. And remember that whenever you are writing the truth, your truth, that's all you need, you know? And it's gonna. It's gonna be good. It's gonna resonate with people. And I think the big picture version of that is when we're living our truth, when we're being our authentic selves, that's what is going to bring us the most happiness. That's what is going to serve our communities.

Mike Curato [00:14:45]:

That is what is going to make the world a better place. Not to sound too Pollyanna, but I really do believe that, and I feel like I have experienced that. Like, the more authentically I live my own life, like, standing in my truth, the better I feel. So there's my advice.

Chisa Uyeki [00:15:07]:

So thank you for being willing to talk to us today about censorship and banning books. I particularly wanted to talk with you because I know during the time period that you were ALA president, which is American Library association, there was a dramatic increase in the banning of books. One thing I read said that challenges increase, so 65% from 2022 to 2023, particularly in public libraries, and it was mostly in schools and public libraries. Can you speak to what prompted the steep increase at that time?

Lessa Kanani’opua Pelayo-Lozada [00:15:41]:

Yeah, absolutely. So it was a really, like you said, a steep increase during the pandemic. Right. And what it was really fueled by were a minority of organized voices who wanted to take power and control away from individuals whose stories were finally being told. Right. Like, the majority of books that were being banned were those books who were by or about people of color, people in the LGBTQIA community. Those types of books were targeted. And so it was groups like Moms for Liberty who would organize lists of books that they would then send to individuals who would just walk into a library and say, I want to challenge all of these, not even having read them.

Lessa Kanani’opua Pelayo-Lozada [00:16:27]:

Right. Like in Texas during this time when it was. I mean, it's still increasing now, but the numbers. I'm going to segue and come back to that Texas story, but the numbers are decreasing. And part of that is because folks are afraid or don't want to report it because they don't want to bring attention to it and they're afraid of retribution. But so in the state of Texas during this time, there was a, like a state assembly person who wanted to ban a list of like 850 books. Right. Things on there, like the Great Gatsby, things that, like regular.

Lessa Kanani’opua Pelayo-Lozada [00:17:02]:

Regular. Right. Like classic works of literature, textbooks, things also about the body were targeted during this time. And it all stemmed kind of from the fear of the pandemic as well. Right. Like these two things were going hand in hand because in 2019, I believe it was, there were 619 challenges to books, whereas last year, right. In 2023 there were 4240. Just to kind of put numbers next to those percentage increases that you shared.

Chisa Uyeki [00:17:34]:

And those, I think, are individual titles as well.

Lessa Kanani’opua Pelayo-Lozada [00:17:36]:

Right, exactly.

Chisa Uyeki [00:17:37]:

Like we had Mike Curato here and he wrote Flamer and that being banned. It was banned in many different places, but it would be counted once there. When you said that people weren't reporting it, are you talking about librarians or school librarians, that they were dealing with this challeng and rather than reporting it to Penn or to the American Library association, which is where librarians would usually report it, they're not because of the negative attention that they would receive.

Lessa Kanani’opua Pelayo-Lozada [00:18:06]:

Exactly. One school librarian, for instance, whose name is Amanda Jones and she's from the state of Louisiana, she just came out with a book actually, about her experience being at the school librarian in the center of book challenges in her parish and having folks dox her and threaten her livelihood and, you know, stand outside her school and protesting. Like, it's really scary for a lot of librarians in many areas. And I, I want to note also, right, like, often when folks think about book bans, they think it only happens in conservative areas or they think it only happens in quote, red states, but it happens literally in all 50 states, at least minimum one that's been reported. Book challenge. And so it's happening right in our own backyard. Also right. Like Huntington be is a perfect example of book banning in Southern California and the effects of that, where now there is a commission that has to review and vet every single book that goes onto a shelf in Huntington beach and then they move removed a lot of books about puberty and people of color from the children's section into the adult section, like it's happening right in our backyard.

Chisa Uyeki [00:19:18]:

I mean, I feel pretty well informed. But when we started planning these events and I looked up, you know, I looked up Texas, I looked at Florida because we had heard so much about it. But then when I looked up California, I was really surprised. I mean, we're a big state, we've got a lot of people, but the number of bands was really surprising. So I appreciate you giving us that local example so we can think about it. But these are school boards, these are city councils that are involved in the banning. Right? So exactly. There is an impact.

Lessa Kanani’opua Pelayo-Lozada [00:19:50]:

Exactly. Because these organized groups, right, who are a vocal minority, because There was an ALA study done that showed that 70% of voters across party lines were actually against book banning. But these organized groups, their plan is to, for lack of a better word, infiltrate these school boards and education boards and get pro censorship individuals on there so that they can take away our access to information and to stories that reflect our experiences or reflect others experiences and allow us to build empathy and learn about another's perspective.

Chisa Uyeki [00:20:23]:

So this month, as we've been focusing on banned books, I've been reflecting a lot on our current role as librarians, as champions protecting the right to read. But I also want to make sure to acknowledge that the history of libraries and librarians in supporting assimilation, in controlling reading, I'm talking about, you know, more than 100 years ago or 100 years ago. But I also been thinking about this idea of censorship as a tool of white supremacy and of colonizers, and that that was really the role at the beginning of the United States. But as we see it, I think that we're continuing to see that censorship is operating as a tool of oppressive dominant cultures. What do you think about that idea?

Lessa Kanani’opua Pelayo-Lozada [00:21:12]:

Yes, short answer. Yes, longer answer. I mean, that's what we're seeing today, right? Like we're seeing it used at this to silence queer voices. Right. Like bipoc voices. And it's how that tool is used over and over again. Right. Like this isn't the first wave of censorship, like you said.

Lessa Kanani’opua Pelayo-Lozada [00:21:33]:

Like, our public libraries were often founded to kind of, like, educate people and make them the kind of citizen that they are supposed to be. But during the 50s, during the McCarthy era, censorship rose also. Right. And that was a political indoctrination during the 80s, right. Like people were banning Judy Blume. Right. Like kind of the backlash to women's liberation also, and feminist movements. And so we see these exactly as you said, she's being used as tools of oppression.

Lessa Kanani’opua Pelayo-Lozada [00:22:03]:

And it's our job to stop that. Right. And to really make sure that we're elevating the voices of those who have been historically marginalized and that we're learning the stories from the not winner side. Right. From the people who experienced it and maybe lost their culture or regaining their culture and what that looks like. So it's up to us to continue fighting those systems over and over again.

Chisa Uyeki [00:22:30]:

In talking about it being up to us, can you think of or share a memory of your time as ALA President that demonstrated the powers of libraries in supporting the right to read?

Lessa Kanani’opua Pelayo-Lozada [00:22:41]:

Yeah. There were so many. I mean, everywhere I went, folks shared their stories of success and heartbreak. Right. Like, I think that was one of the toughest things that happened for me as being ALA President because there was only so much that I could do to help these individuals on the ground. Right. Like, it was really emotional support that I was providing the ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom provided kind of like that. How was your policy? You know, do you need a lawyer? Do you need money because you've lost your job? That kind of support.

Lessa Kanani’opua Pelayo-Lozada [00:23:11]:

But what really, I think hit home for me was when I went to the Florida Library association conference because during that time there was talk about the state of Florida leaving the American Library association because the politicians in Florida were against our values and our ideals. And I wasn't sure that I would even be welcome at that conference. Right. I didn't want to create more trouble for individuals who are already fighting against their local politicians and their state politicians. But they invited me with open arms to even provide a little talk at the beginning of the conference about censorship and about book challenges. And they shared their stories with me of how hard they were fighting and how they were looking for guidance, but understood that they had to make this up as they were going along because they'd never faced bans on, you know, diversity in college libraries. Right. It's interesting to think of the importance of privatized colleges in the state of Florida who were not subject to state laws and became resources for, quote, diversity education and were supplementing the state universities and just kind of the passion that they all had.

Lessa Kanani’opua Pelayo-Lozada [00:24:32]:

Right. They could fight, but it was often seeming self serving. So they were continuing to rally local community members who were not librarians or library workers to say their story and state their cases for them and fight against these laws. And so they didn't get everything they wanted. Right. Like, laws were passed about how to school libraries reviewing the materials that go in, and they were trying to interpret them kind of in a way that upheld our values of intellectual freedom, but respected. And so they wouldn't go to jail, essentially. Right.

Lessa Kanani’opua Pelayo-Lozada [00:25:05]:

So they were constantly navigating this tightrope. And I really admired their tenacity to stay and to fight that fight. Because not everyone can stay in places like Florida. Right. Like a lot of trans folks had to leave because it was not safe for them. But those who could stay and fight are still there and fighting every day to make sure that their students have access in one way or another.

Chisa Uyeki [00:25:29]:

I didn't know that about the private universities and colleges. I love that. And that such the spirit of librarianship. Similarly, the New York Public Library, I'm sure you're aware, but I don't know if our guests know, opened up ebook and their online library to teens anywhere in the nation who had lost access to books so that they could get those books as ebooks, which is so awesome.

Lessa Kanani’opua Pelayo-Lozada [00:25:54]:

Yeah. Book sanctuaries, I think, is what they're calling them. Chicago Public Library also does it. And I believe LA County Library might have joined in San Diego Public as well.

Chisa Uyeki [00:26:03]:

So awesome.

Lessa Kanani’opua Pelayo-Lozada [00:26:04]:

Yeah.

Chisa Uyeki [00:26:05]:

I wish we had more time. I have one final question to ask you, which is if you could share with us what you think college students, staff and faculty can do to protect the freedom to read and to work against censorship.

Lessa Kanani’opua Pelayo-Lozada [00:26:18]:

Well, first of all, attending programs just like this. Thank you all for coming out and learning and seeing where you fit into this puzzle as well. Right. I did a talk recently at LA Harbor College, which is part of LA Community College District, and they were like, what can we do? We didn't really understand the role of libraries in this. And we didn't really understand just how prevalent it was and continues to be. And so I invite all of you to please Visit Unite against bookbans.org It's a campaign of the American Library association and dozens of other institutions and publish and groups like Pen America, Penguin Random House, who are putting together resources that are kind of grab and go for what situation you're in. You can sign up for emails. They're not going to spam you.

Lessa Kanani’opua Pelayo-Lozada [00:27:09]:

They're going to email you when something in your area happens and they need to activate you to come out and speak at some kind of board meeting or write a letter. And they provide templates for it also. They provide templates for those letters and those campaigns. They provide talking points. They provide fun things like if you want to hold a banned books club in your home to share resources with others. And I would say also, you know, how you can help is to support your librarians, right, and your library workers, whether it's public, academic or school or special and have an experience. You need to send that to our administrators and say I really appreciated the diversity of the collection or this program really gained insight so that when book banners come to our door we have those letters and we can say that our community wants these things and we are providing what the community wants, not what just a couple of loud voices want.

Chisa Uyeki [00:28:09]:

Thanks for listening. I hope you'll check out the Show Notes for more resources and information about your constitutional right, the freedom to read, and how you can act against book banning. Thank you for listening to the Mount San Antonio College Podcast, brought to you by Mount SAC's POD Office and created in partnership with Avant Haus Media. Original music created and edited by Nira Azira. Be sure to check out our growing library of over 230 episodes and let us know your thoughts. You can reach me Chisa Uyeki at C U Y E K I at mountsac dot E D U. Wishing you an amazing year and happy listening.