

Celebrating Freedom of Information Day and an Informed Citizenry: *The Winning Essay* 4-20-95

By Charlene Lavoie, Community Lawyer

March 16th was Freedom of Information Day in Winsted. Students from The Gilbert School helped celebrate this year's annual event, sponsored by The Shafeek Nader Trust for the Community Interest, by informing themselves about freedom of information laws and participating in a quiz which included an essay question. This year, students were asked to explain the concept of freedom of information and freedom of information laws to someone from another country or how they would use the Freedom of Information Act to obtain information which would benefit public health or safety. The three award winners were selected based on their knowledge of the law and its importance.

Jason Walonoski received the second place award by writing about requesting information from the Agriculture

Department and the Environmental Protection Agency on such pesticides as Aldicarb and DDT and using the information to warn the public about the use of these chemicals. Kelley Ellsworth received the third place award for her explanation of the freedom of information law to someone from another country and her understanding of the importance of the law.

Freshman Sonja Swenson wrote the following dialogue explaining the freedom of information laws to a person from another country, her cousin Sven from Sweden. For this demonstration of the mechanics and purpose of freedom of information laws, Ms. Swenson was awarded first place in the annual awards ceremony.

The Freedom of Information Act

By Sonja Swenson - 3/14/95

It was a brisk Thanksgiving evening right before dinnertime. Sven, a cousin from Sweden, was staying with us for the remainder of the year. While cooking dinner Sven and I got onto the subject of the American government and the Freedom of Information Act.

"So what is the Freedom of Information Act?" Sven inquired while setting the glasses on the table.

"Well," I began as I set the table for a hearty Thanksgiving dinner, "the Freedom of Information Act states that any person may apply in writing to a public agency to request information sought and shall promptly receive the information unless it is exempted, you know restricted."

"Hmm, what kind of information is restricted?" Sven inquired.

"Good question Sven," I complimented as I checked the turkey in the oven. "Certain adoption records, personnel or medical files, and certain law enforcement records are all exempted from public knowledge. These exemptions are good, after all I wouldn't want everyone having access to my medical records if I worked for the government."

"Yes, that's true," Sven laughed. "But when did the Freedom of Information Act get started?"

"The Freedom of Information Act was adopted by the federal government in 1966. It seems that the executive branch of our government was withholding information from Congress. So they passed this law, then ran into another problem. In some cases it would take years to gain access to the information and agencies would charge a considerable amount of money for the information. So Congress decided to place some guidelines on the law. The law required that any person would receive the information requested promptly, which means 10 days for the federal government and 4 days for the state to reply and that people making requests could be charged no more than 50 cents a page for copies." (25 cents a page in Connecticut).

"The State of Connecticut also adopted a Freedom of

which mirrors the federal law," I added.

"Your knowledge really impresses me, cousin," Sven said. "But who can use the Freedom of Information Act, and what is its purpose?"

"Anybody can use the Act, Sven, not just American citizens. It's really very simple. A person writes to the agency that they wish to gather information from and, as long as the material is not exempted, can receive the information within days. If you wanted to know the ingredients and safety of your prescription drug, you could write to the Food and Drug Administration. They should send you a list of the contents and additional information on the side effects as well as safety. It is not that costly, plus the cost can be waived, you know, if you are using the information for public purposes."

"And the purpose, Sven, is probably the most important thing that I can tell you. The Freedom of Information Act keeps America's democracy strong. It keeps the people informed so we can be good citizens, so we can evaluate and challenge issues, or vote for a change with government elections. The Freedom of Information Act helps the American people get involved and this keeps democracy going. I mean, think about how it would affect every American's daily life if our democracy fell apart. A good citizen must get involved so that this won't happen and a good citizen needs to be knowledgeable. The Freedom of Information helps citizens accomplish all of this."

"Well I am very impressed, you really know your government and you are prepared to deal with issues and problems properly because of this knowledge," Sven said admiringly.

"That's why my dream is to be a lawyer. The law, the government, and the well being of the people of the United States is where my heart lies," I concluded while pouring the milk and glancing at the nutrition label. Yes, the Freedom of Information Act does a body, of a country, good!