

[Grandparents for Truth mobilizes to fight book bans, right-wing school boards \(19thnews.org\)](https://www.19thnews.org)

How a group of grandparents is mobilizing to push back against Moms for Liberty

Grandparents for Truth, a project of progressive advocacy group People for the American Way, is working to fight book bans, right-wing school boards and what it describes as authoritarianism in the nation's schools.

[Nadra Nittle](#)

Education Reporte

December 11, 2023, 6:00 a.m. ET

At The 19th, we're committed to publishing journalism that you can trust throughout the critical moments that shape our democracy and our lives. Show your support during our Fall Member Drive, and your donation will be matched. Double your gift today.

When the parental rights group Moms for Liberty kicked off its second “Joyful Warriors” summit in Philadelphia in June, it did not do so without fierce opposition. Hundreds of demonstrators showed up to protest the organization labeled an “extremist group” by the Southern Poverty Law Center for its efforts to rid schools of materials that highlight the nation’s history of racism or LGBTQ+ issues. Among the demonstrators were members of the newly formed Grandparents for Truth, a project of the progressive advocacy organization People for the American Way (PFAW). Television producer Norman Lear, who died

December 5 at age 101, established PFAW in 1981 to counter the “moral majority” agenda of the religious right.

Grandparents for Truth, which formally launched in June, bills itself as an antidote of sorts to conservative groups like Moms for Liberty that strive to influence school curricula. Instead of supporting book banning, educational gag orders and far-right political candidates, the left-leaning elders, and their allies, are mobilizing to give children what they call “the freedom to learn.” Members are speaking out against censorship at school board meetings, backing progressive school board candidates and organizing against extremist ones. They’re writing legislators to urge them to take a stance against bigotry. All the while, they’re demonstrating that scores of older people are invested in fighting school policies that ignore the role communities of color and queer people play in society.

The 19th spoke with Alana Byrd, PFAW’s national field director, and Marge Baker, PFAW’s executive director, about Grandparents for Truth’s origin and mission as the nation’s culture wars unfold in classrooms.

At this point, many Americans are familiar with Moms for Liberty and other parental rights groups. What do you want them to know about Grandparents for Truth and the impetus for its launch?

Alana Byrd: We’re seeing a great influx of book banning and challenges around the country. We’re seeing a real need to fight back against

authoritarianism and censorship. We're also seeing in our own membership, a lot of older folks and grandparents in general who are trying to find a way to fight back. So we created Grandparents for Truth.

Part of that was definitely inspired by their own life experiences. Marge is a grandparent and one of our founding Grandparents for Truth. My own mother is a grandparent and also the child of Holocaust survivors who heard this story over and over again from the start that this is how it begins. It begins with a challenging event, the banning of books, censorship, authoritarianism. That's how we get to a scary state.

Marge Baker: Authoritarianism is taking shape now in a way that is really, really, really serious, and we felt that there were organizations out there pretending to be for freedom and liberty, but really what they mean by that is freedom and liberty for only particular people, which was not OK. So, we felt like we needed to launch something that very visibly and viscerally confronted that message. It felt that we really needed to make the statement by launching Grandparents for Truth as a counterforce to those voices that are, again, trying to own this notion of patriotism and freedom, when really what they're about is freedom and rights for just sort of a privileged few.

Alana, you mentioned that your grandmother was a Holocaust survivor. How does it make you feel that books about the Holocaust, including “Anne Frank’s Diary: The Graphic Adaptation” and “Maus,” have been banned?

Byrd: It's really scary to see. We're seeing very specific types of books being challenged and banned. It's not all books. We're seeing an influx of

bans on books that talk about the lived histories of LGBTQ people, people of color, communities of color, and then also we're seeing, like you said, bans on books about the Holocaust, which is very scary. They're banning books that talk about the history of banning books and how this whole thing started.

Baker: This authoritarianism — really a lot of it is based in Christian nationalism, that this country was founded as a Christian nation. And what they really mean is that it was founded as a White Christian nation, so material that is “acceptable” is material that only uplifts those traditions. So you end up with a whole host of communities that historically have been marginalized and attacked who are ending up being attacked by this latest book banning and censorship ... in the name of freedom, but this is not about freedom, and we know it's not.

Moms for Liberty is not quite a household name, but it and organizations like it have become increasingly visible across the nation. What does Grandparents for Truth plan to do to make the public more familiar with it?

Byrd: Unfortunately, the opportunities to get our name out there are many. We launched in Philadelphia; we had over 200 people at the rally and more who were aware of it, so we came out with a bang. We went to Temecula, [California, in August] and had over 200 people there. Everyone was learning about what Grandparents for Truth is, what Grandparents for Truth is planning to do and what we are doing. Unfortunately, we continue to see these book bans, we continue to see these challenges and we continue to see bad governance in school boards and opportunities, unfortunately, for us to fight back. I wish that

Grandparents for Truth didn't have to exist, but we keep getting opportunities for us to.

Baker: The energy is there from our grassroots, if you will, the energy is there for folks who are hungry for something that they can do to push back. Groups like Moms for Liberty are well-resourced, so it is a challenge to confront them, but I think the energy and the aspiration to challenge what they stand for is absolutely there, and that's really what we feel like we're tapping into with the Grandparents for Truth.

You mentioned launching in Philadelphia and visiting Temecula after that. What other parts of the country are you monitoring?

Byrd: Well, you might have heard of a governor — his name is Ron DeSantis — that's over there in Florida. (Laughter) He is fighting a culture war against “wokeness,” which is spreading across the country. He's doing everything he can to make sure that the voices of LGBTQ people and people of color are stifled as much as possible. We're also seeing a lot of challenges and censorship in Pennsylvania, across Southern California. Texas is another battleground as well as Virginia, Wisconsin and Indiana, where some big fights are bubbling up.

Can you discuss your approach to strategizing in places where culture wars have infiltrated school systems?

Byrd: Rallies are really important in getting people out, making them understand that they're not alone and that they can speak their voice. We

have mobilizations for our members as well. We get them to write to their senators or write to their school board members or speak out at school board meetings. We get them to knock on doors in support of recall efforts like [the one in Temecula] and knocking on doors in support of good school board members and good policies.

Baker: In a partisan arena around school board elections, in particular, one really, really important challenge is to know ahead of time [about extremist candidates]. We're partly assisted through our right-wing watch research operation to know where groups like Moms for Liberty are putting the energy into getting folks elected, so we can flag for members of the community, "Hey, don't get taken by surprise. Here's what they purport to be for, but here's what they're really for," so there's a way of sort of making people aware of who's running and why they're running. We're also doing what we can and working with allies to support candidates who are running on what I call a "freedom-to-learn" agenda for their school boards. These candidates are anti-censorship, anti-book banning and about creating the environment for kids to learn the entire spectrum of our nation's history and culture. So, there are really two aspects: One is trying to identify troubling candidates and make sure folks in the community know about them and then the other is finding places where we can go in and proactively support candidates with freedom-to-learn values.

Most voters in the nation's electorate are over age 50, so grandparents are already a politically engaged group. Does that give your group an advantage in terms of outreach to your target demographic?

Baker: As a grandparent [of four], I really get in a fundamentally, kind of profound way that I'm responsible for helping to build the future in the

world that my grandchildren will inherit. That means community engagement, getting involved in your local school board issues, and it's also getting involved in elections. I think we, as grandparents, have just a unique perspective on history, and we've seen how censorship and book bannings have played out as tools of authoritarianism in the past. So it's really, really important that we're extra, extra motivated to engage.

Grandparents for Truth is open to everybody — people who are grandparents and also supporters or grandparents — but at its core are folks who really have a sense of responsibility for future generations, for the world that their grandchildren will inherit.

Byrd: Grandkids are also allowed. I'm a grandkid for truth, absolutely. (Laughter) We're not all at that point yet [of being grandparents], but we want to do something and we believe in the message specifically of Grandparents for Truth. Just to give you a little bit of personal background — my grandmother would go around to schools, including my own when I was a kid in elementary school, and speak about what her experiences were in the Holocaust, and I feel a certain responsibility as a grandkid for truth to uphold her legacy.

Some people make generalizations about grandparents. They think that elderly people might be more likely to support censorship than younger people or uninvested in what happens in schools. Can you address those stereotypes?

Byrd: Something that I've noticed personally in meeting grandparents and working with them is that the nature of grandparents is changing. My grandparents are all deceased now but were very old in my mind and

would be fascinated at the idea of a smartphone. Grandparents now are people like my mom — they're on Instagram more than I am, they're on Facebook way more than I am. A lot of them are baby boomers who come from this old hippie generation, and some of them did turn sort of conservative, but a lot of them are definitely on the left side of the wing. We're seeing a lot of grandparents who are just very active and look a lot different than the grandparents of old.

Baker: I think that's absolutely right. The other thing that's really hit me profoundly is when I think about the role that my kids' grandparents played in their lives. They're now deceased, but they imparted really, really important values to my kids that my kids are both living and passing on to their kids. So when I see that, and I also feel the enormity of the threats we are currently facing to those values, I think, and I'm not alone, that it makes people of my generation want to get more engaged.

They want to get more engaged in building a world that will be hospitable to their grandchildren, that will teach the values of inclusivity and respect for difference and see that as a strength to our communities and not as a weakness.

Byrd: One more point is that a lot of grandparents are now guardians of their grandchildren. We're seeing more and more grandparent involvement in the lives of grandchildren and in the education of them as well.

Any last thoughts you would like to share with people about Grandparents for Truth?

Baker: This is going to be a fight for the long haul, but I know that we're on the right side of history. We will get there. This is for the long term; this is for the next generation.