

From: Mike Curato, author/illustrator of *Flamer*

To the Students of Marietta High,

I originally wrote this letter for the students at a different school earlier this year. Sadly, I am sending these words out again. I hope they will be a source of strength for you.

Regardless of the outcome of this book challenge, and the other challenges that will come, there are things I need you to know.

Remember you have agency. I understand how hard it is to have others making decisions for so many parts of your life. But your life is in your hands. You have a voice. Use it. You may not have the power to vote yet, but you can still speak your mind. Don't let anyone silence you. Don't let them forget that you too are a human being with rights and feelings. Let it out. Speak it, sing it, write it, paint it, dance it. Censorship is fought with expression. That is your first amendment right, no matter your age or station.

Remember you are the future. Remember this moment. Remember how you feel. Remember what everyone said. One day, very soon, you will be an adult member of the community. What rights will you uphold? What injustices will you fight to repair? Who else in your community has been relegated to the margins? How can you help them? Lead with facts and compassion.

And above all else, know this: You deserve to be here. No matter who you are, what you believe, or who you love. I need you to know this because when I was young, it was implied that there was no room in this world for someone like me. Not unless I followed their rules. I tried to be the person I thought everyone wanted me to be, and it broke me. Don't do that. Don't let anyone use shame to dictate how you should live your life. I almost lost my life to that lie. But I survived, and in living my truth, I have found the greatest joy. *Flamer* is my truth and my joy. It may make some people uncomfortable, but their comfort is NOTHING compared to your safety and happiness.

Remember that. They can ban my book, but no one has the right to ban YOU.