

Student Press Freedom, Episode 313

Tuesday, Feb. 14, 2023

Speakers:

- **Kavitha Cardoza**, EWA Radio
- **Jessica Votipka**, The Grand Island Independent
- **Marcus Pennell**, Viking Saga

Keywords:

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Editor's Note:

To help education reporters cover transgender students fairly and without causing harm, please note that this transcript includes a transgender student journalist discussing “deadnaming” and their “deadname.” Do not “deadname,” or use the pre-transition name, of a transgender person unless they invite you to. [Read more here.](#)

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 00:01

The Collaborative for Student Success is criss-crossing the country on the Route K12: Exploring Education Recovery podcast to showcase how federal recovery funds are reshaping schools. Join Collaborative Director Jim Cowen as education commissioners, K12 reporters and advocates share how historic funding is accelerating learning and meeting the diverse needs of students. Catch up at EduRecoveryHub.org or wherever you listen to your favorite podcasts.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 00:47

This is EWARadio, the podcast of the Education Writers Association. I'm Public Editor and your host, Kavitha Cardoza. Many of you caught the journalism bug when you were students -- maybe in high school or college -- when you first felt the thrill of being able to question someone in authority or challenge the status quo. When you heard your voice on air for the first time or saw your byline in print, or after you uncovered an injustice in your school community and made a difference. After that, despite the challenges, you knew that journalism was what you wanted to do. today's podcast is in honor of Student Press Freedom Day on Feb. 23. It's an initiative by the Student Press Law Center, which raises awareness of the important work student journalists do, highlights how censorship threatens that work and empowers students to fight back against attempts to take away their First Amendment rights. Education reporter Jessica Votipka with The Grand Island Independent in Nebraska wrote about student censorship. Welcome to EWARadio, Jessica.

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 01:56

Thank you. Glad to be here.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 01:58

Jessica, in your piece, you quoted the former Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer, who called America's public schools the "nurseries of democracy," and student newspapers play a critical role, right?

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 02:14

Absolutely. Yeah.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 02:15

We also have another guest, Marcus Pennell. He's now a freshman at the University of Nebraska Omaha. But while this was going on, he was a senior and a journalist at the Viking Saga, a student newspaper of Northwest Public Schools. Welcome, Marcus.

Marcus Pennell, Viking Saga 02:33

Hi, glad to be here.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 02:36

Administrators said the journalism and newspaper program was cut because the school board and superintendent are unhappy with the last issue's editorial content, I was quoting there. What were you writing about, Marcus?

Marcus Pennell, Viking Saga 02:50

So, for that June issue, we kind of wanted it to be like a Pride issue. You know, we wanted to write about LGBT-topics and stories. And, specifically, I wanted to write about how they were affecting me at school. But I think some of my peers wrote about, like, the history of the gay rights movement, and one wrote about like the science of sex and gender. So, kind of just covering all those different areas.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 03:14

Because it was Pride Month.

Marcus Pennell, Viking Saga 03:16

Yeah, yeah. And, you know, we had faced some backlash previously about using our chosen names and pronouns. They restricted the right, the use of our preferred names. So, they were forcing us to use our birth names on our articles. So, we kind of wanted to take a stand against the administration without putting our teacher at risk, because, you know, we were kind of told that was what the consequences would be.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 03:39

Well, what was interesting was, Jessica, in your article, you quoted an administrator as saying, "Why do you think this is newsworthy?"

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 03:49

Yeah, I was kind of shocked when he said that. It's a pretty big issue, you know, student press freedom and LGBTQ rights in general. Yeah, I was surprised.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 04:00

This experience was also very personal for you, Marcus. You're a transgender man, and on your birth certificate, your first name is Megan. You found the name they had published with Megan as your byline. Can you tell me a little bit about that, and also what dead-naming is?

Marcus Pennell, Viking Saga 04:20

So, sometimes when a trans person, you know, starts beginning their process of transitioning, they, you know, want to change a name to a name that matches, kind of, the traditional aesthetics of that gender, you know, so like, for example, I was born a woman. So, my name is Megan, but then I wanted something more, a little more masculine. So I went with Marcus. You know, it's kind of different for everyone, though. Some people don't change their names. Some people change it to just something that means something to them. But, you know, for me, it was a big deal because it was kind of like, the art I was creating was being attributed to someone that didn't really exist. You know, that's why it meant a lot to me.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 04:57

Tell me what your reaction was when you saw Megan as your byline.

Marcus Pennell, Viking Saga 05:02

You know, I was, I wish I could say I was more surprised than I was, you know, I knew a lot of people in my community weren't super accepting of a lot of LGBT stuff, but I'd really never expected it to bring the kind of controversy it did to my school. And, of course, you know, it hurt my feelings. You know, it didn't, it didn't make me feel good. Plus, when I have to send those things I've written to people, I have to explain why my dead name is there. And that's, you know, that's embarrassing for me. It's a lot.

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 05:32

You know, Marcus, you taught me so much, you and all the kiddos at Northwest. I have, you know, I grew up in a small town, graduated with 18 white kids. And it was just very eye-opening. He taught me so much and I thank you for that.

Marcus Pennell, Viking Saga 05:47

Oh, thank you so much. You know, that means a lot.

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 05:50

I don't think people understand how big a deal dead naming is. Yeah. I mean, if you think about it, it's like when Alison Gash, explained it to me. It was like, "Oh, my gosh, you know--"

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 06:02

Who is she?

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 06:03

Alison Gash, who is an associate professor at the University of Oregon told me a lot about dead naming. And it really, really clarified some things to me, especially when paired with Marcus's experiences. I don't think people get what a big deal it is.

Marcus Pennell, Viking Saga 06:16

And it's such, like, a basic issue of respect.

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 06:19

It's a human right. Call yourself what you want to.

Marcus Pennell, Viking Saga 06:23

It's, it's just surprising how many people will get it wrong, or how many people will not understand how big of a deal it is.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 06:28

So, Jessica, tell me a little bit about how you heard about the story. And just a quick synopsis of what had gone on until then.

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 06:39

Yeah. So, I had been on vacation. I think it was like the longest vacation I'd had in several years. I got to my desk, which looks like Office Depot exploded. And I looked at on top of my pile of junk is this little note, and it had loopy handwriting on it or in black ink, and I saved it. And it said it was from a parent and it was anonymous parent. And they said that the student newspaper journalism program had been canceled because of LGBTQ content. And they mentioned, you know, that the Saga had won tons of awards and been very successful. Then I thought to myself, I was like, "Oh, my God," I was like, "I can't -- you know, this is not something that people should ignore. This isn't something that should fall through the cracks."

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 07:25

And the student newspaper was 54 years old.

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 07:28

Yeah. I mean, it was it was an institution, you know, and winning awards. So it's very successful. But yeah, and the thing, it was kind of a faith thing, too, because, through some sleuthing, I figured out who the advisor for the Saga was. And I found them on Facebook and reached out, found out that there had been an email sent to, I believe our -- I'm not sure our press room -- because we have a printing area too that -- Saga used to hire us to do their printing. The email somehow got lost, because the staff member told me that they had sent an email and that I should see it. And I said, "Well, I didn't receive it, you know, who did you send it to?" They mentioned and I, you know, went around the office: "Do you remember this? Do you remember this? Do you remember this?" And the kind of key phrase was in that email, someone had saved it. And it said "canceled because of editorial content." And it was like bingo.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 08:24

Wow.

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 08:25

And from there, I talked to the advisor. They refused to go on the record, just for reasons that are pretty obvious. So, that gave me a lot to go with. It was kind of -- it was kind of hard. Marcus was hard to convince to talk to me.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 08:46

Let me ask him why. Marcus? Are you like reporters who like asking questions and not answering them?

Marcus Pennell, Viking Saga 08:54

Um, I don't know about that. But you know --

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 08:58

Well, it's hard to talk about it's very personal, you know, and I'm sure you're thinking, "Do I really want this in the newspaper?"

Marcus Pennell, Viking Saga 09:07

Yeah, for sure. Definitely. Um, to be totally honest, I'm wasn't really out to my family at all. So you know, they it was it was a matter of "Am I ready for them to find out? And you know, they did.

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 09:18

Wow, I didn't know that, Marcus.

Marcus Pennell, Viking Saga 09:19

Yeah, it was, um, like I said, I'm honored to be in the position I am of like, an advocate for so many of these kids. Plus, you know, I face a lot of bullying at Northwest so I wasn't, I was -- I didn't really want that to continue into my adult life.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 09:36

How did all of you react in your, in your newsroom when you heard about this?

Marcus Pennell, Viking Saga 09:42

So, we actually, okay, we actually they -- didn't actually they -- okay, sorry. They actually didn't inform us of the Saga's cancellation until the summer.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 09:52

Oh my gosh, so they waited 'til the school year was over, and then you heard about it?

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 09:57

Yeah, that's right.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 09:58

So, it was the summer, but how did everyone react? Your fellow reporters and, and other classmates?

Marcus Pennell, Viking Saga 10:08

Kind of the same stuff? You know, the ones that were in support were greatly in support. And you know, they were just, it was beyond belief for a lot of people. And I feel like even still, for a lot of people, when they hear about it, they don't believe it. You know, it's kind of -- it's crazy.

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 10:21

Yeah, cuz you guys got some pretty icky reactions to your Pride issue, didn't you?

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 10:28

What reactions?

Marcus Pennell, Viking Saga 10:29

Honestly, I missed a lot of it, because the seniors kind of get a graduate early, you know, but um, you know, I heard stories from kids that were still there of kids saying they, they were gonna burn the papers. And, you know, kids saying that, "Oh, like, you know, this, like, even if there are LGBT kids in northwest, we're all still mostly normal. So, we should have normal things in our paper" -- you know, just stuff like that.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 10:58

Well, first of all, I should say, before we get into, like, what you (Jessica) found out -- this is not the first time that Nebraska's school districts have tried to, kind of, censor student newspapers, right? In fact, one student press freedom group told you, given its size, "we hear from Nebraska students and journalism advisors way more than we should." Give me some examples.

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 11:24

Yeah, we've had several, only in recent years. One was because a student wanted to attend a school board meeting, which seems pretty basic to me. Another student wanted to report on a Confederate flag and why --

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 11:37

Sorry, one sec. The students urged other students to attend school board meetings, and that was censored?

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 11:44

Right. Right.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 11:47

Why?

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 11:50

That's a good question. They were told to they that they should be attending student council meetings instead.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 11:57

Oh, my goodness. Okay, go on.

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 11:59

There were a few other examples recently. One was a student one to report on a Confederate flag that was in a school parking lot. Another one was about prior review. Meaning, say Marcus writes an article. Before the article is published, then administrators can, I guess, kind of, screen it? Look it over. And if there's anything they don't like, they can censor it, essentially. It just blows my mind because the Saga could have easily been missed. I mean, thank goodness for two things. No. 1, that anonymous parents note and that email. If those two things hadn't been found, this would have gone on and nobody would have known about it.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 12:36

Right. You have this wonderful quote in your piece where someone says, "You can't censor something that doesn't exist anymore."

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 12:43

Exactly.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 12:44

So, Marcus has talked about what classmates were seeing. What did you find?

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 12:50

Like I said, it was hard to get some of the kiddos to talk. Marcus was easier than most of them. I did have one student come in who really, really got me. They came to The Independent office, and we sat down. And Marcus, I can't remember if you are with us, that time. But they said that they are so used to people telling them to kill themselves on social media and in the hallways, the only, sorry, the only response that they say, automatically, is "Can't you come up with something better?" And I can't imagine living my life like that. Having to put up with that and having to live with it.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 13:38

Oh my God. That is just, it's just awful for anyone and I can't even imagine teenagers.

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 13:46

Yeah, and that student chose not to go on the record, but was very helpful in giving some direction. So I mean, you can quote people and even the people you don't quote, they give you some direction, you know.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 13:59

This is another, kind of, key point of the importance of student journalism is that they are reflecting their school.

Marcus Pennell, Viking Saga 14:08

For sure, and I think a big part of like, why we wanted to do the the June issue and everything. We wanted some of those kids who, like, weren't as connected as us to see that there were kids like them at our school. And there were kids, you know, at our school who wouldn't say that stuff to them and who were on their side.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 14:25

Right. So, tell me a little bit about the reaction to the story, I guess. Let's go with you, first, Marcus. What was the reaction to this story about your stories?

Marcus Pennell, Viking Saga 14:40

Honestly, it was just so crazy. Um, I think no one really expected it to get as big as it really did, you know, to have like national media attention and all these, you know, all these outlets reporting on our little school in Grand Island, but it was awesome. You know, just like Jessica said, you wonder how many Sagas like -- how many of these situations go unnoticed. And I was just so thankful that ours wasn't. We all felt pretty hopeless. But, we started to gain a lot of it back from, from the story and the support we've been getting from so many people.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 15:11

And Jessica, what was the reaction to your story from your point of view?

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 15:15

Um, I was really surprised. You know, on one level, I had a renewed positive sense of humanity, because I had people calling my office phone and saying, you know, wonderful article, thank you for supporting. People on Facebook were really cool and social. I did have some backlash. I did have some school officials contact our office and say some things. But, you know, I think it was just --

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 15:45

When you say, "say some things," they were not happy, I take it.

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 15:48

No, no. And I mean, they didn't directly reference the article, I don't believe.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 15:55

But that's an old, a very old trick that we use, right? Calling someone's boss to try and intimidate. Okay, what else?

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 16:02

You know, I think overall, it was just, I felt like it was really positive. And, I mean, I guess I just delivered the message.

Marcus Pennell, Viking Saga 16:10

Yeah, for sure. And I'll never be able to thank you enough for that, Jessica. Oh, you knocked it out of the park.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 16:10

One of the things I loved, like your piece was so brilliant because it was so simple. You did what a reporter does, right? You were hearing all these things. And you dug in and you interviewed people from just a variety of organizations like the Nebraska Press Association, the ACLU, the Student Press Center, the University of Nebraska, like you, you were listening to what people said, and then you were finding out the facts. And it was interesting when someone said, like, "Why is this newsworthy?" And you have this whole paragraph on the legal precedent that allows news organizations to decide on their own what they consider newsworthy? It was, like, so airtight?

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 16:47

Well, I couldn't have done it without you, that's for damn sure.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 17:05

I was thinking this is, like, highlights the importance of regular newspapers where, you know, sometimes a story may not get the attention it deserves. And this is a way journalists amplify important issues. So, tell me a little bit you had talked about New Voices law. Tell me a little bit about what that is.

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 17:27

Basically, it's a law that ensures students have freedom of the press that they can't be censored through, like, like we talked about prior review, things like that. Just basics, you know, basic First Amendment rights for student journalists.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 17:38

So, I understand some states have adopted this law or laws that are similar, but Nebraska hasn't is it?

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 17:45

Yes, that's true.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 17:46

So, what happens next? I'm hoping there's a feel-good end to the story. That the Saga student newspaper has suddenly kind of resurrected, and it's still publishing.

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 18:00

Well, well, I actually heard from a faculty member a few months ago, I think it was that they were going to bring the Saga back in digital form. Right before this started recording, I texted that person and asked if it was published, and they said it has not been published online yet.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 18:16

Marcus, how do you feel about that?

Marcus Pennell, Viking Saga 18:20

You know, it's pretty complex. I've pretty complicated feelings about you know, the whole thing, obviously. But, you know, obviously, it was wonderful to hear that it's coming back. But, of course, there's certain caveats to that, which I wasn't too excited to hear about, like the online format. And, they

actually replaced the adviser, you know, with seemingly no reason, kind of like how they shut it down with seemingly no reason.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 18:46

Jessica, let me ask you, what do you think people don't understand about student journalists?

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 18:52

I think people don't understand that student journalists take what they do very seriously. They're not just out to write about, you know -- school dances are important students, to be sure, but there are other things that student journalists are passionate about, that can change their fellow students' lives. And I think people don't get that. I think, you know, they think, "oh, student newspaper or yearbook, you know, whatever. It's nice. What, you know, it doesn't matter." Well, it does matter.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 19:18

And some of them have broken really, really important stories in their schools that no one else would know about.

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 19:25

Oh, absolutely.

Marcus Pennell, Viking Saga 19:27

And I feel like a lot of people forget, a lot of seniors in high school can vote, you know. You know, a lot of people want to write off high schoolers as kids, but kind of like Jessica said, we're getting to be adults. You know, it's time to start thinking about these serious topics.

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 19:42

This sort of gives a portrait to the community of what is going on in the school. You know, taxpayers, parents, if you want to know what's going on the school. Ideally, you look at student publications.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 19:55

When I covered local school districts, I used to read the the local students newspapers.

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 20:01

Oh, absolutely. And sometimes the students that work there are wonderful sources. You know, I did a story recently in a different school district in the same town. And those students that I met through the newspaper and through other, you know, secondhand, firsthand, have been indispensable. They have been just wonderful to have because you have to include the student voice. How can you write about schools without talking about students? And I think that's kind of one of the things I like about education reporting. I like writing human interest, and there's nothing that has more human interest than education. I mean, at its core, it's about people.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 20:37

Marcus, what advice would you give other student journalists who find themselves in the same spot?

Marcus Pennell, Viking Saga 20:42

You know, I would say, just keep writing, and just keep creating, even, if you know, no matter who tries to stop you. Also, you know, to a lot of queer students, I would say, keep being yourself, too, obviously, you know, don't let any of that bullying change you or affect you deeply. And, of course, don't let it affect the way you write at all, too.

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 21:04

Yeah, and I mean, in addition to that, I would tell student journalists, don't be afraid to reach out to the professional journalists. We are here for you, we want to encourage you. You're important. You're gonna be us someday, probably better. And, you know, if you need something, if you are being censored, if you feel like you're not being listened to, please tell us.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 21:29

And I think there's kind of a natural relationship between education journalists and student journalists.

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 21:35

True, I kind of went mother hen on this one.

Marcus Pennell, Viking Saga 21:39

I'm glad

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 21:42

I wanted to give you both the last thought so what is the one thing you took from this experience, and I don't mean, like you took through the next day or the next week or the next month. I mean, something that you think will stay with you forever.

Marcus Pennell, Viking Saga 21:56

Um, for me, this is pretty hyper-specific to me, but I think it's that, um, it's really taught me a lot about how to, like, love myself as an LGBT person, you know, and how to heal from a lot of the stuff I faced in high school. That's definitely been the, you know, the biggest thing for me, and I'm sorry, I'm getting --

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 22:18

Are you crying? Because I'm crying.

Marcus Pennell, Viking Saga 22:22

You know, when I started realizing I was queer, and trans and all that, I really thought it was going to -- I thought it was going to affect me negatively, so much way more than it could ever positively. But just from this experience, I've received so much support from people I never expected, and who I never even like would even tell I was queer in the first place. Like, so many of my aunts and uncles actually reached out to me and were supportive, and even my pastor at my parents' church was supportive. So, that's definitely, you know, a big thing that I've been learning. It's like self-love and stuff like that.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 23:03

I have to say, Marcus, we're so proud that you felt safe enough to tell your story and and share it with others. And we're very proud of you as a reporter. And we can't wait until you're a full-time journalist when you graduate.

Marcus Pennell, Viking Saga 23:21

Yeah, of course. I'm excited. Yeah, it's crazy. You know, I thought, I thought being queer would shut a lot of doors for me. But you know, it really hasn't. And that's been a great lesson to learn from all this.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 23:32

That's wonderful. And what about you, Jessica?

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 23:36

It's made me a better person, for sure. And it's made me a better journalist. I got to really dig in. And that is my favorite type of story. I do not like to do fluff. I like to stuff like this. I was so passionate. I am so passionate about the story, and it gave me confidence. I love connecting with people. And I'll tell you why I definitely connected with Marcus to those students and everyone in this story.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 24:01

We've been talking with Jessica Votipka, who's a reporter for The Grand Island independent in Nebraska and Marcus Pennell, a freshman at the University of Nebraska and a student journalist. You can follow Jessica on Twitter at [@@GI_Jesca](#) and Marcus is on Instagram. His handle is [@JazzForLateNights](#). Thank you both so much for making time to chat.

Jessica Votipka, The Grand Island Independent 24:26

Thank you.

Kavitha Cardoza, EWA Radio 24:27

That wraps up this episode of EWARadio. I'm Kavitha Cardoza. Do you have any questions for Jessica or Marcus? Let's continue the conversation. And if you'd like to learn more about how to support student journalists, you can find that information at the Student Press Law Center website. Special thanks to Angelina Liu and Kristan Obeng from EWA and Raul Garcia for production assistance. The mission of the Education Writers Association is to strengthen the community of education journalists and improve the quality of education coverage. For more than 75 years, EWA has helped reporters get the story right. Thanks for listening and lifting up education journalism. Collaborative for Student Success is crisscrossing the country on the Route K12: Exploring Education Recovery podcast to showcase how federal recovery funds are reshaping schools. Join Collaborative Director Jim Cowen as education commissioners, K12 reporters and advocates show how historic funding is accelerating learning and meeting the diverse needs of students. Catch up at [EduRecoveryHub.org](#) or wherever you listen to your favorite podcasts.

Marcus Pennell, Viking Saga 24:27

Yeah, thank you.