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Group 6

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Project Paper:

The Community Chalkboard and Podium: A monument to the First Amendment

On Saturday, October 13, 2007, my fellow group members and I took a trip up to Charlottesville, Virginia to observe the First Amendment Monument Podium. This podium was designed to serve the public as a place to express their freedom of speech, exchange ideas, and associate freely. The podium is essentially a two-sided wall that is located beside the city's amphitheater, where artistic and musical expressions are presented on the site. The public is allowed to use the chalk and address both planned and unplanned public gatherings. It is also considered to be a traditional public forum where it is used historically for public gatherings, discussions and associations, such as parks, streets and sidewalks. It was hard for us to find space on the wall to contribute our ideas because the podium was filled completely even though it is cleaned every Thursday. Private citizens may also clean all or some parts of the slate anytime they feel obligated. This trip took us about two hours excluding the traveling time.

There are two permanently inscribed quotes on different segments of the wall. These quotes are stated as the following:

“Above all else, the First Amendment means that government has no power to restrict

expression because of its message, its ideas, its subject matter, or its content. To permit the continued building of our politics and culture, and to assure self-fulfillment for each individual, our people are guaranteed the right to express any thought, free from government censorship.”

By the U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall

“Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.”

By poet John Milton

These statements depict the origin of the First Amendment and its history of the process that made it a part of the constitution today. They were also applied in the Declaration of Independent by the Founding Fathers. The idea of the First Amendment started in 1450 when the printing press was invented. The British crown licensed all presses in England in fear that the public distribution of printed materials would get out of control. The licenses required more restrictions as each year passed. The government created rules that were only beneficial to themselves instead of the citizens, which resulted in the creation of the First Amendment. The First Amendment was intended to provide a ban on prior restraints that resulted from the unfair ruling. As citizens of the United States, we should value this law

and commemorate its history. The freedom of speech is such a significant aspect in human rights that is covered under the constitutional protection.

The First Amendment rights remind me of a conflict between the government and its citizens that happened in Taiwan. Even though Taiwan has a democratic government, the government did not keep its word on allowing freedom of expression. During the Taiwanese presidential election in 2004, citizens protested against the former president to be re-elected. The groups of protesters decided to wear and use the color red as a sign of rebellion. As a result, the president ordered the police force to arrest anyone that was wearing red in public. This action violated the freedoms of the Taiwanese citizens, which only led to more rebellions. This revolt was so severe that the former president had to take back his order on the unreasonable arrests. The rebellion did not end until the results of the election were publicly posted. This event was very disturbing to me personally because I am very opinionated in the different political stands in the Taiwanese government.

I learned that the First Amendment has become a major part of our society today since it deals with every action and every word we speak on a daily basis. Without the First Amendment, the United States would not be the world leading country of today. In fact, the United States would be similar to communist countries such as China. Citizens would not be able to express their own ideas, thus slowing the economical development of the country.

I am very glad to be an American citizen knowing that unfair ruling of the government

will come to justice one way or another, especially when it comes to violations against the
First Amendment right.