

Librarian Fired in Books Dispute to Receive \$700,000 Settlement

County officials in Wyoming fired Terri Lesley, a library director, after she refused to purge children and young adult books that contained sexual content and L.G.B.T.Q. themes.

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The dispute at Campbell County Public Library in Gillette, Wyo., involved which books belonged on the library's shelves. [Google](#)



By [Adeel Hassan](#)

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A library director in Wyoming, who was fired two years ago because she refused to remove books with sexual content and L.G.B.T.Q. themes from a library's children and young adult sections, was awarded \$700,000 in a settlement on Wednesday.

Terri Lesley, the former director of the Campbell County Public



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its board of commissioners, the library board and individual members of both government boards.

The lawsuit accused them of violating her First Amendment right to free speech, and of firing Ms. Lesley in a retaliatory and discriminatory way. She had worked for the local library system since 1996 and directed the system for about 11 years.

"I am just thrilled by this opportunity to put it behind me; it was quite an experience," Ms. Lesley said in an interview on Thursday.

"I don't regret standing up for the First Amendment in any way," she continued, "but it was kind of a brutal process to experience it, to have it be such a contentious issue, and for it to be across the country and be called things like a 'pedophile' or a 'child groomer.' Those things were all very hard to experience."

Ms. Lesley found herself in the middle of a dispute in 2021 over which books belonged on the county library's shelves — [a debate that has been playing out](#) across communities and school boards, as so-called book bans have surged in the United States.

In June that year, the library highlighted L.G.B.T.Q. books to mark Pride Month.

The book challenges came soon afterward. About 25 books were targeted, including titles like "This Book is Gay" by Juno Dawson, "How Do You Make a Baby" by Anna Fiske, "Period Power" by Nadya Okamoto, "Doing It" by Hannah Witton, "Sex is a Funny Word" by Corey Silverberg, and "Dating and Sex: A Guide for the 21st Century Teen Boy" by Andrew P. Smiler.

Many of those books had been on the shelves in the children's or young adult's sections for years before Ms. Lesley heard any complaints, she said.

Some people behind the challenges took issue with the placement of the books. One resident told the county library board that the L.G.B.T.Q. books should be moved to the library's adult section to protect the emotional, physical and mental health of children, as reported [by the Gillette News Record](#).

But Ms. Lesley resisted the calls to move or remove the books.

"If you segregate these books, say, in the adult section, and you're teenager, and you go to try to find something on a topic and that book isn't there, you won't discover it," she said on Thursday. "That

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She received some support from the community for her moral stance and fortitude, and the Gillette News Record recognized her at the end of 2021 in its annual [“Ten Who Made a Difference”](#) list for her leadership.



Terri Lesley.
Terri Lesley

But about 18 months later, after quarrels with the Campbell County officials, who sided with the book objectors, the library board fired Ms. Lesley.

Campbell County is among the most conservative areas in a very conservative state, but hundreds of people showed up at a special library board meeting when Ms. Lesley was fired, most of them in support of her, [the Gillette News Record reported](#) at the time.

There were also a few dozen residents who showed support for the board.

After the news of the settlement, Ms. Lesley's lawyer, Iris Halpern, said, “We care fundamentally about our constitutional rights and we fundamentally care about our neighbors, even if they're different than us, and want them to have equal access to our public institutions.”

The county board of commissioners and the county's lawyer did not immediately respond to a call or email requesting comment.

Books with gay and lesbian themes have been a flashpoint in schools and public libraries for years. In June, [the Supreme Court ruled](#) that parents with religious objections at a public school district in Maryland could opt their children out of classroom instruction about books with L.G.B.T.Q. themes.

[Books challenges and removals soared](#) around 2021, fanned by a network of conservative groups that spread lists of book titles they considered objectionable on social media.

American Library Association and PEN America, the free speech organization.

The restrictions have become so “rampant and common” on books in public schools that in some states, like Florida and Utah, they are now considered a “routine and expected part of school operations,” according to a PEN America report issued last week.

A separate lawsuit filed by Ms. Lesley that accuses three members of a family of defamation and intentional infliction of emotional distress will continue. The family members accused Ms. Lesley of providing obscene material to children and reported her to the Campbell County sheriff’s office in an attempt to have her arrested. A special prosecutor has concluded that the books were not obscene.

Susan C. Beachy contributed research.

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