News



Valerie Minteer and Chip Stewart pose for a photo in Samuels Public Library in Front Royal, Virginia.The couple, who moved to Front Royal about three years ago with their two children, joined Save Samuels Library. (Courtesy of Chip Stewart and Valerie Minteer)



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November 20, 2023
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Growing up as a homeschooled Catholic kid in Front Royal, Virginia, Bridget Randolph remembers winning awards from the summer reading challenges and entering the holiday creative writing contests at Samuels Public Library. She called it "a very warm and safe environment."

But this year, members of that same conservative Catholic community, including her father, launched a campaign that started with requests to remove books with LGBTQ+ content from the library's collection and then escalated to threaten the very existence of the library.

Across the U.S., conservative Catholics are lobbying their local libraries to remove books with LGBTQ+ themes from their shelves, joining a national anti-LGBTQ+ movement that has focused on children.

These campaigns come amid increasing efforts nationwide to remove books from public libraries. In September, the American Library Association released data showing that 16% of book challenges that it recorded in the first eight months of 2022 occurred in public libraries, while 49% of the challenges in the same period in 2023 were in public libraries. Those challenges totaled 695 "attempts to censor library materials" and objected to 1,915 titles. Most of the titles challenged were by or about a person of color or a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, the ALA said.

In Front Royal, the contentious library conflict resulted in a nearly four-month standoff over library funding as the Warren County board of supervisors withheld funding at the request of Clean Up Samuels Library, the anti-LGBTQ+ book activists. At one point, the county was a week and a half from shutting down Samuels Public Library.



Graduates of Christendom College in Front Royal, Virginia, are seen during their commencement May 14, 2022. The college of about 500 students was founded in 1977 after the 1960s cultural revolution "struck a devastating blow to Catholic higher education." (CNS/Courtesy of Christendom College)

Front Royal is home to Christendom College, whose website says it was founded in 1977 in response to what the founders considered the negative impacts of the 1960s cultural revolution.

Mass pushback from library supporters was successful in securing the library's full funding, but their attempt to cement a majority on the county board of supervisors in the Nov. 7 local election was unsuccessful, making some wary about future demands on the library.

Clean Up Samuels began their public campaign with an invitation to a May 13 event, titled "Beer, Babysitting, and Cleaning Up the Samuels Library," to fill out requests to remove library books with LGBTQ+ content. The event was posted on their website, saying that the library's content is "a risk for Catholic children whose parents are

working to guard their innocence." It also was posted in the Young Adults of St. John the Baptist Facebook group.

Books under fire

These are among the books Clean Up Samuels objects to, citing what they call "pornographic" content.

- *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo
- *This is Why They Hate Us* by Aaron Aceves
- *Cool For the Summer* by Dalia Adler
- *Cemetery Boys* by Aiden Thomas
- *What If It's Us* by Becky Albertali and Adam Silvera

Throughout the spring, about 90 people filed almost 800 forms objecting to 134 books with LGBTQ+ content.

As Clean Up Samuels expressed frustration with the library's initial responses to their concerns, which included creating a "new adult" section for patrons ages 16 and up and creating new library cards that allow for greater parental supervision, the group developed four demands. They were:

- that the governance structure of the library be transferred from the current nonprofit board of trustees to direct control by the county board of supervisors;
- that "pornographic" books be removed from the children's section of the library;
- that the library sever any connections with the American Library Association;
- and that the library leadership and board be removed.

Clean Up Samuels leaders did not respond to multiple requests for comment for this story.

Eileen Grady, the interim library director for Samuels, said that Samuels has no significant ties to the ALA. Like many small libraries, she said, they can't afford the membership, even though they have referenced the association in their collection policy.

Grady said that the board of supervisors' ultimate decision to fund the library with the governing structure largely intact came after the board learned that Clean Up

Samuels' suggestions were unfeasible. "The county had their own people run numbers on what it would cost if they took over the library and, at the end of the day, they realized we were by far the cheapest option," she said.



Throughout the spring, about 90 people filed almost 800 forms objecting to 134 books with LGBTQ+ content at Samuels Library in Front Royal, Virginia. (Courtesy of Chip Stewart and Valerie Minteer)

Grady highlighted the costs of the Clean Up Samuels campaign on the library, including more than $50,000 to hire outside legal and communications help and about $50,000 more to reevaluate the young adult collection. Costs also included staff and board hours required to read every book Clean Up Samuels has challenged.

Most significantly, Grady said that the stress and harassment "cost us a much loved library director and at least one other staff member." In addition to receiving mountains of email, Grady said that former director Michelle Ross, who resigned in August, was called "a pornographer, a groomer, a pedophile."

"This is not the Catholic Church or the teachings of the church" that I was raised with, Grady said. "We were raised to love one another."

Throughout the last year, community support for the library has increased. The library now has 20,549 total patrons, up 2,035 new patrons from the previous fiscal year. The library trustee president told The Washington Post that donations were up 25% since the anti-LGBTQ+ campaign began.



(Unsplash/Trust "Tru" Katsande)

For Randolph, who now lives in Brooklyn, New York, fighting for Samuels from afar is a way to honor her younger sister, Rose.

A year before Bridget Randolph lost her to suicide, Rose mentioned Front Royal's library in a speech to her Catholic boarding school. Rose described how, beginning at about age 10, while her mother was at daily Mass, she sneaked out to the library to check out books forbidden by her parents.

"I read everything from Harry Potter to the Quran, and found my worldview infinitely expanded," Rose told her classmates. "As the inconsistencies I had questioned my whole life were resolved, I felt as though I had woken up from a bad dream," she said.

What Rose didn't mention in her speech, said Bridget, was that Rose was gay, a major factor in the bullying she experienced in Front Royal that led to the post-traumatic stress disorder that Bridget says Rose was struggling with when she died.

Catholics organizing against libraries

Fringe Catholic groups throughout the country have also organized around the removal of LGBTQ+ content from public libraries.

A seminarian walks past a photo of Pope Pius X/

A seminarian walks past a photo of Pope Pius X at the Society of St. Pius X seminary in Econe, Switzerland, May 9, 2012. St. Marys, Kansas, is home to a chapter of the controversial group. (CNS/Paul Haring)

In St. Marys, Kansas, a hub for the controversial Catholic Society of St. Pius X, the city commission has since the end of 2022 repeatedly threatened to withhold the lease for the decadeslong site of the regional library headquarters if the library does not remove materials with LGBTQ+ content. All five St. Marys city commissioners are St. Pius X parishioners, and one commissioner has said that their shared faith has motivated the demand.

In Steubenville, Ohio, Catholics with connections to the Franciscan University of Steubenville, including alumni, a professor and a professor's wife, have spearheaded a persistent campaign to remove LGBTQ+ content from anywhere but the adult section of the local public library.



Marie Thomas has made public statements in support of the Steubenville Library at two meetings this year. (Courtesy of Marie Thomas)

Marie Thomas, an alumna of the university who is still based in Steubenville, has made public statements in support of current library policies at two meetings this year. "Being someone in the queer community myself, I think representation is super important," she said.

While a local news outlet last year published multiple letters to the editor from the library standing by their current policies last year, the public library director announced to county commissioners on Sept. 14 that the library had formed a committee to create a solution that would be broadly acceptable, including to the anti-LGBTQ+ activists.

Steven Millies, author of *Good Intentions: A History of Catholic Voters' Road from Roe to Trump*, sees these fights over library books as part of a "natural reorganization that follows Dobbs," the 2022 U.S. Supreme Court decision that overturned Roe v. Wade and left it to states to decide whether to legalize abortion.



Steven Millies, author of Good Intentions: A History of Catholic Voters' Road from Roe to Trump (Courtesy of Steven Millies)

Millies added that it was interesting, as he observes LGBTQ+ issues replacing abortion to animate fundraising and organizing for conservatives, that these movements also focus on the grassroots level.

In Warren County, Virginia — home of Front Royal and Samuels Public Library — conservative Catholics have long been politically active and are gaining political power.

In 1977, Christendom's founder, Warren H. Carroll wrote, "Our college takes its name from the word which embodies the Christian social and political ideal: a society, a culture, a government in which Christ the King reigns."

Tom McFadden Sr., former president of Virginia Right to Life, helped bring Christendom to Front Royal. McFadden now leads Front Royal Catholics Civic Education Group, which has boosted the Clean Up Samuels campaign.



Richard Kurzenknabe has attended St. John's Church since 1982 and in Front Royal since 1977. (Courtesy of Richard Kurzenknabe)

While the Catholic population of Warren County has been growing, Catholics remain a minority. The U.S. Religion Census from the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies reports that 11.2% of the population of Warren County was Catholic in 2020.

Nevertheless, one parishioner at St. John's, the local Catholic parish, already holds one seat of five on the county board of supervisors, and two other St. John's parishioners won seats in the Nov. 7 election, according to the Front Royal Catholics Civic Education Group, which endorsed the candidates.

Tom McFadden Sr. did not respond to a request for comment. McFadden and his son are both members of the Warren County Republican Committee.

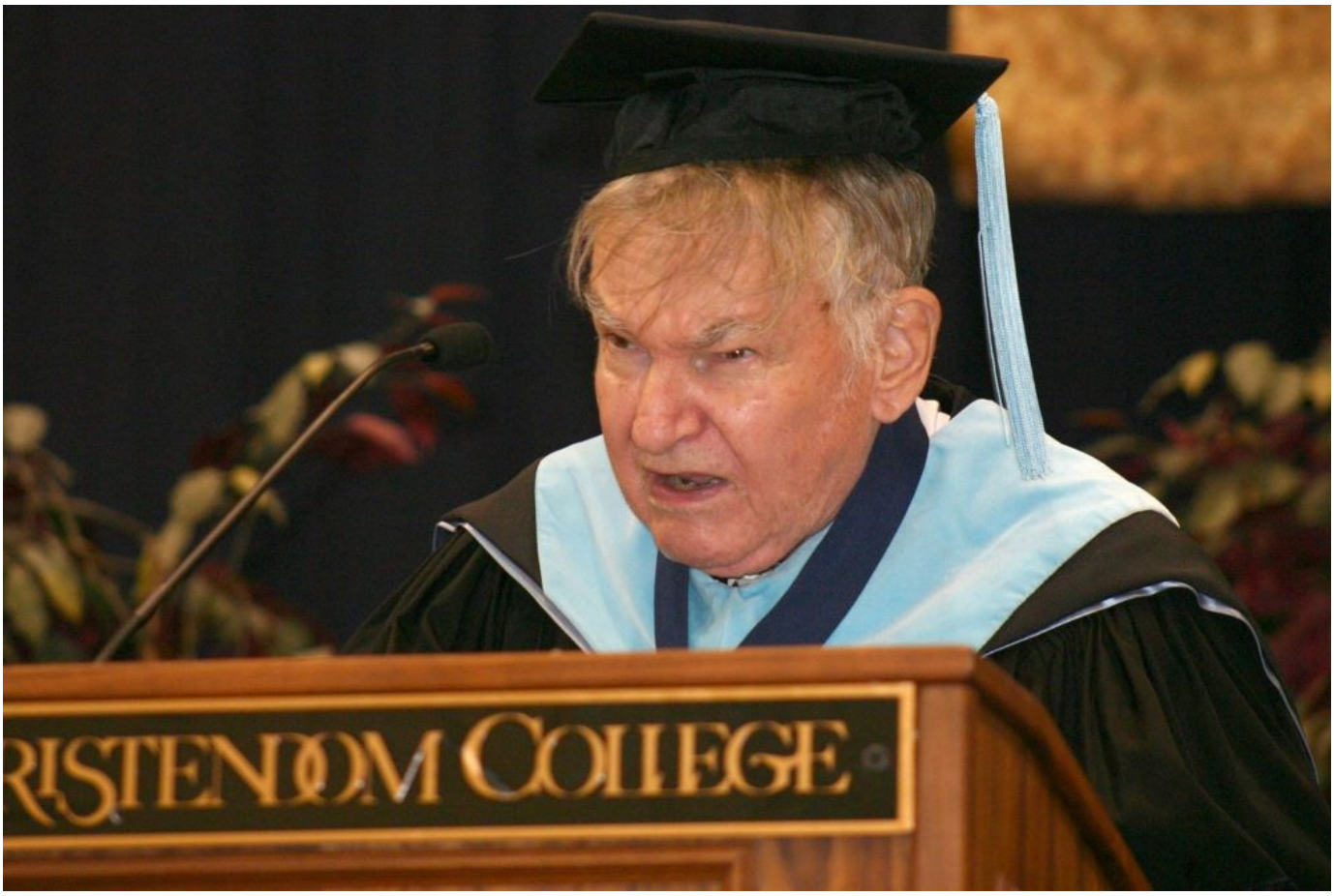
While conservative Catholics affiliated with the Front Royal Civic Education Group have been politically organizing for years, their campaign against the library sparked fierce resistance from other community members.

"That passion that the community felt for the library," Randolph said, "brought together a very wide coalition of people" from across the political spectrum.

Chip Stewart, an attorney who was raised Catholic, and his wife, Valerie Minteer, moved to Front Royal about three years ago with their two children. While they described their experience of Front Royal as "beautiful" and "welcoming," they told NCR it was "shocking" to see the effort to remove books from Samuels.

"Regardless of your religious affiliation, nobody has the right to tell anybody else what they can and cannot read," Minteer said.

"I did not foresee us becoming activists, but I guess we have," Stewart said of his and Minteer's involvement with Save Samuels.



Warren Carroll, seen in this undated photo, founded Christendom College in Front Royal, Va., in response to what he saw as a decline in religious identity and

commitment to the liberal arts at U.S. Catholic colleges and universities. He died in 2011 at age 79. (CNS/Courtesy of Christendom College)

As Catholics became the face of the impending library shutdown, other Catholics in the community made clear that the faithful held a diversity of opinions. Forty-two Catholics, including seven Christendom professors, signed a statement in early September calling for the library to be funded.

"The library has been existing for many years, and it's been successful. And I think it's unfortunate that we're having to go through all this," said Richard Kurzenknabe, a retired police officer who has been at St. John's since 1982 and in Front Royal since 1977.

And while Kurzenknabe counts Clean Up Samuels supporters at St. John's as friends, the father of eight and grandfather of four said, "everyone has the rights to make their own decisions in their lives." While he doesn't want to limit the library collection, he does think parents should make decisions about their children's library access.

Other community leaders also stepped forward to call for the funding crisis to end. On Sept. 16, Robert Hupman, chair of the Warren County Republican Committee and a Primitive Baptist, a denomination that believes that only people elected by God will be saved, weighed in on Facebook. Urging the board of supervisors to accept the library's terms, Hupman wrote, "Let's stop this nonsense from being dragged out any longer."

In an interview with NCR, Hupman compared the calls to remove LGBTQ+ books from the library to calls to ban guns. "I'm a big fan of the U.S. Constitution," he said.

> 'Regardless of your religious affiliation, nobody has the right to tell anybody else what they can and cannot read.'
> —Valerie Minteer
>
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Save Samuels members say that a major reason the library received funding was their organizing ahead of the Nov. 7 election. "If they wanted to be reelected, I think

that they were concerned," Kurzenknabe said of board of supervisors members who changed their position on the library.

Save Samuels created a nonpartisan sample ballot of candidates supporting their position on the library and distributed it outside the polls during early voting.

Stewart also served as the treasurer for two write-in campaigns that were organized in the early fall to challenge candidates who were endorsed by Front Royal Catholics Civic Education Group and are both St. John's parishioners.

But when Nov. 7 rolled around, election results fell short of what Save Samuels hoped for, with six losses for candidates on their pro-library ballot. All but two of Front Royal Catholics Civic Education Group's endorsed candidates, who largely aligned with Republican nominations in partisan races, won.

Still, the write-in campaigns gained enough momentum to present serious challenges to the candidates. Tom McFadden Jr., the son of the Front Royal Catholics Civic Education Group leader, won his school board seat with 62% of the vote, with 38% voting for a write-in.



Since losing on their library demands, Clean Up Samuels has been largely silent, although their website now features a link to a new Front-Royal-based group whose mission is "to decolonize rural America by bringing democracy to bureaucracies in small towns around the country."

In Front Royal, many community members wish the conflict would end.

"I felt like we needed to just get back to being neighbors," Hupman told NCR, saying that the community was "fighting too much" and that homeschooling parents like him need the library's programs for their kids.

Hupman serves on the boards of six nonprofit organizations, including work with families, children and people who are homeless.

"I wish they would take all this energy that they put towards some of this stuff and put it back towards joining a lot of these nonprofit boards," he said.

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Retired U.S. Marine Corps Col. Bill Hammack, a Catholic who has worked on several local Virginia races for Republican candidates, also expressed regret about the impacts of the Clean Up Samuels campaign. "I hear people talk about the Catholic war in Front Royal," he said.

Front Royal "has a beautiful mountain backdrop. It's bordered by two interstate highways on the east and west. They have an inland port for manufacturing," said Hammack. Yet, he said, Front Royal "cannot attract industry." Hammack speculated, "I think it's all about the din."

Many community members expressed concern that Clean Up Samuels' combative brand of politics would come to represent all Catholics, even as they tried to push back against that narrative.

"I think they're doing damage to the church. I think they're doing damage to the community," Stewart said.

Millies said that these kinds of polarizing conflicts can turn "religion generally, Catholicism particularly, into a toxic brand," even among Catholics who are open-

minded about the LGBTQ+ community.

Grady, the librarian, said, "We have to learn to live together regardless of our beliefs, regardless of our personal preferences." She continued, "We have to respect one another, and I think that's key to a civilized democratic society."

***Editor's note**: This story has been updated to correct information in a cutline.*