

A Small-Town Librarian Spoke Against Censorship. Then the Dark Money Came for Her.

Now she's fighting back.

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[MUSIC PLAYING]

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

From New York Times Opinion, I'm Lulu Garcia-Navarro, and this is "First Person," a show where we talk to people about how they come to their opinions and what it means to live with them.

After the bitter divisions of the midterms, I've been thinking a lot about how we talk to each other, just this complete breakdown in communication in so many of our public spaces. It feels like we can say anything about each other — online, I.R.L. — kind of with impunity.

For the past few months, one librarian in Louisiana has had her life upended. She spoke out at a local library board meeting and then was attacked on the internet. She's now at the center of a debate about the line between what is defamation and what is free speech.

Today, on "First Person," Amanda Jones gets targeted — and fights back.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

How's the weather down there?

Amanda Jones

It's very hot. [LAUGHS]

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

It's summer, I imagine. What's very hot for Louisiana?

Amanda Jones

102, but 80, 90 percent humidity.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

My Lord, you go out with a raincoat?

Amanda Jones

Yeah, it's bad. It feels like we're trapped in a rain forest.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

I started talking to Amanda in August. She's a middle school librarian in Livingston Parish, Louisiana, where she grew up.

Amanda Jones

Very, very small town, everybody knows everybody pretty much, for the most part. Or if you don't know someone directly, you know their cousin or their next-door neighbor or their grandfather.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

It sounds like a tight knit community.

Amanda Jones

For the most part —

for the most part, yes.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

Amanda has been a librarian for seven years. She was an English teacher at the same school before that. She calls books that get kids to love reading “home run” books. And in 2018, she started thinking about how the books that are included in a library affect which kids find their own home run books.

Amanda Jones

I read a book called “Marley Dias Gets It Done.” And at the time, Marley Dias was a teenager. And she founded the hashtag #1000BlackGirlBooks. And in the book, she talks about how when she was in school, it felt like every book was about a white boy and their dog. And I grew up in a majority white school, and I have been teaching at a majority white school. And I never really thought about my students of color that felt they weren’t represented in the stories in our library.

And so I really spent a long amount of time — months — looking at the collection. And I noticed that our collection was not very diverse. It was white boys and their dogs. And I mean, we had other books, but it was majority — it was not a very diverse collection.

So I do everything that I can whenever I’m placing a book order to make sure all students are represented, whether they’re white, Black, brown, straight, gay, Christian, not Christian. I try to cover all backgrounds, all ethnicities. Because the kids want to see themselves. And they deserve to see themselves in the library — people that look like them.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

So you read this Marley Dias book in 2018. And you start to reevaluate your collection. And you're adding all these books. You're doing this against the backdrop of, as we know, the increasing sort of politicization in the country. I'm curious how your community responded.

Amanda Jones

So I am not very vocal that we have a diverse collection within the community, just among library circles. I don't make a big deal about it to the kids about the diverse collection. And they just — they don't notice or say anything.

But one time I did a lesson — this is about a year and a half ago. There is a very well known book called "The Undefeated," by Kwame Alexander. And it is a beautiful, beautiful book, the words and the illustrations. And I talked about Kwame Alexander, the author. His family is from Louisiana — or, his wife's family is from Louisiana, and he visits often.

We read the book together. We talked about the pictures. And then I had a book display with some of the characters — or some of the historical figures in the book. And the kids check those books out.

Well, the next day after I did the lesson, my principal came to talk to me because three people had called the school board to tell the school board that I was teaching critical race theory and Black Lives Matter propaganda and liberal propaganda.

And I said, "Well, that's not what I was doing at all." And so I printed the professional reviews. And the book, "The Undefeated," it has so many starred reviews. And so I printed out all the starred reviews. I gave him the book. And I said, "Look, this is what I did." And I told him everything.

And then he came back like 30 minutes later, and he was like, “I don’t see anything wrong with this. Just keep doing what you’re doing.” I said, “OK.”

I thought that was it. I did the next lesson again with the next set of kids. My library has a Facebook page to inform the community about what we’re doing. And a parent had commented, “Why is my child coming home to tell me that y’all are watching videos on police brutality?”

And I’m like, where is this coming — I don’t know where this — so I actually ended up calling the parent and talking to her. And I said, look, this is what I did. I explained the whole lesson. I said, “You can check the book out. And you can read it for yourself.”

And she did. And then she apologized. She’s like, “I’m so sorry.” And it was all smoothed over, and it was OK. But it did happen.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

So one-on-one in your community, you’re able to communicate what it is that you’re doing. But you are starting to hear some grumblings.

Amanda Jones

Yes.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

What were you hearing from other librarians?

Amanda Jones

A lot of librarians — I’m friends with librarians all across the United States. And many of them were telling me about heated school board meetings and book challenges and lists. People were coming up with lists.

It might have been a parent group. Or politicians were coming up with lists. But they would go school to school to check on these books.

You start wondering, oh, is this going to happen to me? Are they going to start yelling about me at a school board meeting? You feel like you know it's coming.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

When does it start to actually hit close to you? You're seeing all this happen elsewhere in the country. You're hearing about it. But when does it start to come to you in Louisiana?

Amanda Jones

Well, we have a public library system about an hour and a half away from me, Lafayette Parish. And I started reading about what was happening to them because they started having challenges at their public library, which was very shocking to me. School I understood, public I did not.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

What do you mean exactly by that?

Amanda Jones

Because in a sense, at school, I understand. You're teaching someone's children. And parents should be involved in their child's education and what they learn and what they're exposed to. But at a public library, it's like birth to death. It's for every age group.

And there were these accusations made that there was pornography on the shelves and inappropriate books. And I'm thinking, well, I mean, my

grandmother is 95 and reads romance. I mean, what do they not want anything in a library? It's a public library for anyone.

And I was keeping close tabs on that situation. And that situation has gotten very volatile over in that parish. [AUDIO PLAYBACK]

- Tonight a passionate debate over a book at the Lafayette Public Library. The book is called, "This Book Is Gay," and was the subject of a complaint over its content.

- This guy just assaulted this lady.

- Controversy continues over the Lafayette Public Library System. [END AUDIO PLAYBACK]

People would record the meetings, and I would watch them.

[AUDIO PLAYBACK] - That is uncalled for. [END AUDIO PLAYBACK]

People were screaming at each other. People were being arrested.

[AUDIO PLAYBACK]

- You're not supposed to Interrupt the meeting. - The Lafayette Public Library is banning book displays on topics like Pride month, Black History month, Women's history and even Cajun heritage. The decision is adding to concerns about censorship in the library system.

[END AUDIO PLAYBACK]

It was very scary. And I was so glad it wasn't happening here.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

But then, of course, it did.

Amanda Jones

Yes.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

Can you talk to me about what happened?

Amanda Jones

So the group that started the hubbub over in Lafayette Parish is called Citizens for a New Louisiana. And I know the players. And I had been monitoring who's involved in all of this.

And I saw that someone from that group posted in our local community Facebook page a picture of a book and said, "There's a library board meeting. You need to go to this library board meeting."

And she did not live here. She's well known, works for Citizens for a New Louisiana. She does not live in our community. Why is she posting about this?

And she didn't post the title. She just posted the picture. And in the picture, it was talking about sex, which is obviously — I figured it was a teen health sex book. Well eventually, within an hour or two, I figured out what book it was: "Dating and Sex: A Guide for the 21st Century Teen Boy." And so I looked it up for myself, because all of our library's records are online. You can just go look it up.

And it was professionally reviewed for children ages 13 and up. And a public library has a collection development policy very similar to a school library. And they have sections in the library. So I look to see where this book was located. And I saw they had one copy in the the entire district, and it was in the teen nonfiction section.

So I'm thinking, what's the problem? It's where it should be. I didn't get it. But I knew that by posting that and saying come to the board meeting, I knew something was coming, and I knew I had to be there.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

So you see this meeting is happening. And you think, you should go. What were you weighing in deciding to go? What were you thinking?

Amanda Jones

Well, I weighed several things because I am a school librarian. And I thought, well, I don't want to get in trouble for speaking as an educator or as a school librarian. But I weighed that with the fact that this is my hometown, my parish, my district. I've had a library card at my public library, the Livingston Parish Public Library, since 1983.

And I thought, I'm a citizen, and I have a right to speak up. I have a right to go talk about this. Who else should go talk about it but the person that's knowledgeable about the topic, who lives here?

So I knew I had — I felt obligated. I felt like I had — I needed to be at that meeting, and I needed to speak.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

Tell me about that meeting.

Amanda Jones

So I walked in. I got there an hour ahead of time. Because I wanted to make sure I had a seat. And I wasn't sure how many people were going to show up.

And everybody that was coming in, most of them I knew. I was like oh, there's so-and-so that I graduated high school with. Or there is of a

family that I know their children went to my school. I was going around the room talking to everybody — “Hey, I haven’t seen you in forever.” And talking to everybody.

Then another group came in. And it was weird. It got weird in the room.

You could tell they weren’t from our community. I don’t know how to describe it. You just knew they weren’t from our community. And they were very dressed up, and the tone of the room shifted a little bit. And then the board came in, and everybody sat down and got quiet. [AUDIO PLAYBACK]

- I’d like to call to order the meeting of the Livingston Parish Library Board of Control for July 19. [END AUDIO PLAYBACK]

The agenda said that the board member wanted to talk about book content and book signage. And I’m thinking, why do we need to talk about book content? There’s already a policy. If you don’t like something, you go fill out a form, and you challenge it. There’s no need to have an entire board meeting.

I knew what this was about. I knew going in, what this was about. [AUDIO PLAYBACK]

- I’m proposing to the board to look into the books that we have in our library in regard to inappropriate sexual content for children and young adults. [END AUDIO PLAYBACK]

There were people concerned, like I was, that the term book content that was on the agenda was code for L.G.B.T.Q.+ materials. [AUDIO PLAYBACK]

- Hello, Board, my name is Amanda Jones. I'm the 2021 School Library Journal National School Librarian of the Year and a resident of Livingston Parish. [END AUDIO PLAYBACK]

I was so nervous, which is weird because I speak all the time. I was very nervous. But I wanted to let them know that I knew what I was talking about in the room, which is why I mentioned that I was the 2021 National School Librarian of the Year. And I wanted them to know that I had some authority as to my knowledge because I'm the president of the Louisiana Association of School Librarians. [AUDIO PLAYBACK]

- While book challenges are often done with the best intentions and in the name of age appropriateness, they often target marginalized communities, such as our Black, Indigenous people of color and our L.G.B.T. community. They also target books on sexual health and reproduction. [END AUDIO PLAYBACK]

I knew that I wanted to talk about censorship in general and the fact that censorship tends to target historically marginalized communities. [AUDIO PLAYBACK]

- The citizens of our parish consist of taxpayers who are white, Black, brown, gay, straight, Christian, and non-Christian. And no one portion of the community should dictate what the rest of the citizens have access to. Just because you don't want to read it or see it does not give you the right to deny others or demand its relocation. If we remove or relocate books with L.G.B.T.Q. themes or sexual health content, what message is that sending to our community? Why is your belief system any more important than others?

[END AUDIO PLAYBACK]

I know that the big theme across the United States has been books with L.G.B.T.Q.+ content. And it hits very close to home when you've taught children that I was the first person that came out to. And several of them are no longer alive.

You love these kids that you teach like your children. And you want to see them thrive. And you want to see them have access to things that will make them thrive. And the thought that they could feel ostracized or belittled or that something was taken from them because someone else in our community does not support the L.G.B.T.Q.+ community — it makes me very angry. And I —

I'll be damned if a kid, another kid — we're going to lose another kid because of something our community has done to make them feel less.

[AUDIO PLAYBACK]

- Hate and fear disguised as moral outrage have no place in Livingston parish. Thank you for allowing me to speak tonight.

[END AUDIO PLAYBACK]

I believe there were 19 others that also spoke, either along the same lines as me or talking about L.G.B.T.Q.+ rights and those books. There were two people that spoke against it. And one was a grandmother, I believe. And the other person was Michael Lunsford from Citizens for a New Louisiana.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

Citizens for a New Louisiana is a 501(c)(4), a dark money group. That means the organization doesn't have to disclose its donors. And it's allowed to push political causes. [AUDIO PLAYBACK]

- Michael Lunsford, Citizens for a New Louisiana.

This is an issue. This is going to be coming up all over the state of Louisiana. It's actually coming up all over the country right now. So I guess buckle up. I apologize, that's just the way it's going to be.

[END AUDIO PLAYBACK]

Amanda Jones

He's not even from our community. He lives an hour and a half, two hours away.

[AUDIO PLAYBACK] - I read the edition, 6a, book content. I'm thinking to myself, how in the world in the state of Louisiana is looking at all 64 parish library board of control meeting agendas that generally come out 48 hours ahead of time and can get together a large group of political activists to come here and fight — how does that happen with two words, “book content?”

I didn't see L.B.G.T.Q. I didn't see sexual content. I didn't see anything. So the question is, how did all of this happen? I can promise you, it wasn't me.

[END AUDIO PLAYBACK]

There was no vote. And the board member seemed to back down.

[AUDIO PLAYBACK]

- I don't know who took this and ran with that and turned it into censorship, banning. I feel like many of you have fallen victim to the polarization coming from the media. I said two words, “book content.”

[END AUDIO PLAYBACK]

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

How did you feel when the meeting ended?

Amanda Jones

I mean, everybody was civil. Everybody for the most part — it got a little heated every now and then. But for the most part, everybody was civil. And I really thought OK, this is going to be OK.

People showed up in support. There was only one or two opposing. This is fine.

And then a few days later, I woke up to a text saying, you need to go look at this website. And there was a picture of me speaking at the meeting with a red circle around my head, outlined in white, that reminded me of a target, that said something along the lines of, why is this librarian pushing pornography and erotica — I believe it said — And how would you feel about her working at your school? And “school” was all caps.

And it had my name in it. And it was posted by Citizens for New Louisiana

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

The same group that had been at the public library board meeting?

Amanda Jones

Yes, exact same group that has spent the past few years in Lafayette parish working to destroy that library and the librarians that work there. And now they had their sights on me.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

So after the meeting, you go home, and you thought this was all over. And you wake up a few days later to discover that this is very much not the case with this post from Citizens for a New Louisiana. Can you walk me through what happened next?

Amanda Jones

So I saw the post. And I started reading it, going down and seeing the comments. And as I went through the comments, my heart just sank because they were saying things like, where I worked and that they were going to come to my school. And I needed to be slapped, people calling me a pervert, a pig, a pedophile, a groomer.

And it was mixed emotions. I'm laughing, I'm like, this can't be serious. But then you realize it is serious. And they're being serious.

So I took a screenshot of it, and I sent it to my husband. And he said, oh, have you seen this one? And he sent me a screenshot.

And it was another Facebook page called "Bayou State of Mind." And that one had a picture that they had taken — one of my professional photographs for my professional website of my face. And they put my full name and the name of my school in the post and said, "This person advocates teaching anal sex to 11-year-olds."

I absolutely — I mean, I don't talk about — my kids are 10, 11, 12. We don't talk about sex at school. I'm a school librarian.

We don't talk about — we don't talk — I would never say the word "anal sex" or talk about anal sex to 11-year-olds.

It was mortifying. I'm like, who is seeing this? Are they going to believe this? Is this what people think — are going to think of me?

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

I mean, what was that like? It's not as if you can be anonymous there.

Amanda Jones

It was a shock to my system. It was so embarrassing. I've spent — I had devoted my life to my school. And now these horrible pictures and these words are going around the community about me. And even though I know most of the community, I was very scared of what their reaction was going to be.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

So did you try and lay low?

Amanda Jones

Oh, yes. I didn't comment on anything. I took some screenshots and sent it around to different librarians — "What do I do about this?"

I cried that entire day. I was hysterical, really. I didn't want my parents to see that. I didn't want my child to see that. It was a bad day.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

How did you talk to your family about what was happening?

Amanda Jones

My parents are very conservative, and we didn't talk for a few days. But I did go over there and say, this is what's happening to me. My mom was like, at first, "What did you do? What did you say?" Like as if I had said like — there was a validity.

And I said, well, let me read my speech. And so I read my speech to them and said, this is what I said. And they were like, well, how did they

get from point — how did these people get from point A to point B with these memes and this, like, what is — and so I had to explain to them, well, let me tell you about this group and what’s been happening over in Lafayette Parish. And let me tell you why I’m being targeted and let me — you know. So I had to explain it all to them, step by step. And when I told my parents, this is coming from conservatives, or people who claim to be conservatives, my parents got very indignant. My dad’s like, “This is extremists.” And I said, “Well, OK, but the extremists, who are a vocal minority are starting to be vocal majority when everybody starts listening to them and agreeing with them.” And we had a long talk about politics and censorship.

But the outcome was that they understood. But it was just like the book with the parent. I had to sit down and have a one-on-one with my family to understand. And they know me, and I live next door. And I can’t go around having one-on-ones that everybody in my community to explain myself.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

So all the stuff is out there. And as we know, when stuff is out on the internet, it takes on a life of its own. Did it feel like there was anything you could do about it?

Amanda Jones

Yeah.

I want to say I spent a week weighing my options. I reached out to a lot of school librarians across the country, like, when this happened to you, what did you do? Got a lot of advice, this too shall pass, and it’ll be OK. And they’d call me down.

But a friend, one of them gave me advice on how to scrub social media. She said, you need to go in and lock down your Twitter. You need to go in and scrub your name and all identifying information about where you work off your personal, on all your social media platforms. I'm always like, I'm proud. I work at so-and-so. And she's like, no, go take that off.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

So basically, you had to go into hiding.

Amanda Jones

Yeah, pretty much. I literally went into hiding. I didn't leave my house.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

And that's the advice they gave — that this too shall pass and don't say anything and just hunker down?

Amanda Jones

Well, it was more of advice along, be careful. These things can escalate and be dangerous. But they did give me other advice, like organizations to contact, where to report it, who to talk to.

They're like, you need to see a therapist. You need to go talk to somebody about this, about your feelings. Don't let this consume you. But I just kept getting angry. I kept being so angry.

So I ended up going and filing police report against the two people that were posting against me. And the Sheriff's Department, they were very supportive. I mean, when I walked in, I had taught half their children.

So we talked about where their kids — like, how old are your kids now, and filled out the report. But they were like look, this is really not — it's

hard to see any justice in the criminal — this is more of something that you need to do in the civil court system.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

And so, what did you do?

Amanda Jones

So I went back. And I have — through my State Library Association, I work with five other women, and we have a group text. And we talk all day every day.

And I was asking their advice, I'm like, what do I do? I said, I want to sue the mess out of them. Like, I am so angry. You can't just post lies about people online and get away with it. That's not how the world works.

Apparently, it is how the world works unless you take action. That is how the world works unless you stand up. And so, I'm a school librarian. I don't have money. A lawsuit is expensive.

So my friend said, would you like me to start a GoFundMe? And I said, well, I don't even know how much an attorney costs. But I ended up talking to an attorney. She had given me free advice for several days. And finally, I called her and I said, I'd like to hire you. And I would like to take this to civil court.

And she told me her retainer. And I called my friend. And I said, I have to do that GoFundMe because I can't afford this. And so we started a GoFundMe.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

And this story you just told me, all of this is the basis for the lawsuit, right?

Amanda Jones

Yes.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

What do you hope will come out of this lawsuit?

Amanda Jones

First and foremost, I'm selfish, and I'm hoping that these people are forced to publicly apologize to me. I don't have hope that that's going to happen.

But I think — I was raised as a fighter, to not take — my dad would say, not take shit lying down but stand up for what you believe in. And I think it's important to stand up. But people feel defeated right now. People are leaving the profession, the education profession, school librarian world. People don't want to deal with it.

But I think that this could set a precedent. I also think it sends a message to the people that get online and defame others. We are real people. And there are real consequences for these actions. You can't just go online and make up lies about people and not face consequences.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

Amanda, you're back in school now. You're juggling your job and this new fight you've taken on. Has all of this followed you into your day to day at school?

Amanda Jones

It hasn't with the kids. There are some parents in the community, parents of children that I taught that have posted negatively online. And I try not to look at it. One in particular, it felt like just a knife through the heart. [CHOKES UP]

[CRYING] That lady, who I thought was my friend, has mocked me online. That's the part — I think that might hurt the most. And it's not a lot of them. It's very few.

I get way more support than I get negativity. But the negativity is what sticks with you.

I'm scared to go out for my groceries — my child. Because at her high school, she plays in the band. And Friday night football games are a big thing. And I go and sit. And I watch her. And I'm petrified that someone's going to say something ugly to me. I'm sorry. I was going to try not to cry.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

It's OK.

You know, when we wanted to do a story on libraries, we talked to a lot of librarians. And so many of them were afraid to go on the record and talk to us.

I'm just wondering what that says to you.

Amanda Jones

Just the fear — so many people that found joy in their jobs are now full of fear. I'd rather not be in this at all. I'd rather it just go away. But on the other hand, I feel I have a responsibility to stand up to these people and set an example.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Lulu Garcia-Navarro

In the three months since Amanda and I had this conversation, a lot has happened. But not a lot has changed. She received a death threat from a man in Texas and is still dealing with the after effects of being targeted.

In response to Amanda's defamation lawsuit, lawyers for the two defendants who had posted about her on their Facebook pages filed motions, asking for it to be dismissed. They claimed Amanda's case was a type of suit known as a SLAPP lawsuit or "strategic lawsuit against public participation," basically, that it was an attempt to silence the defendants from speaking out on an issue of public concern by tying them up in court. It's a defense often used by media organizations facing frivolous complaints about their reporting.

The judge agreed with the defendants and dismissed Amanda's case. During the hearing, the judge explained that the defendants were expressing an opinion when they called the books discussed at the meeting pornographic. And therefore, their posts linking Amanda to pornography were not defamatory. The judge also said that she considered Amanda a limited public figure, someone who had inserted herself into a high profile public debate as an authority. And therefore she had a higher burden to prove defamation.

But Amanda is pushing forward with her lawsuit. She's hired a new legal team who have asked the judge to reconsider her decision. And she'll be back in court on Monday.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

“First Person” is a production of New York Times Opinion. This episode was produced by Olivia Natt. It was edited by Stephanie Joyce and Kaari Pitkin. Mixing and original music by Isaac Jones and Carole Sabouraud. Music by Sonia Herrero. Fact checking by Mary Marge Locker. The rest of the “First Person” team includes Anabel Bacon, Wyatt Orme, Courtney Stein, Sofia Alvarez Boyd and Jillian Weinberger. Special Thanks to Kristina Samulewski, Shannon Busta, Kate Sinclair, Allison Benedikt and Katie Kingsbury.

[MUSIC PLAYING]