

EDITORIAL | ISLAND VOICES

Column: More free-speech awareness is needed

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Charlie Kirk, second from right, and Candace Owens speak during a campus appearance and talk in September at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Owens and Kirk are nationally known for their advocacy for the Republican party.

Is our freedom to have and express differing opinions or thoughts being protected and advanced in today's social climate?

Reading the news accounts of what has been transpiring across our great nation — with threat of violence or even physical harm to those having a different or less popular point of view — seems to indicate that the answer is no.

In late September, two 20-something speakers from the mainland visited the University of Hawaii-Manoa campus for a free-speech event organized by the Hawaii Republican Party and the campus Young Republicans. The Honolulu Star-Advertiser reported that even before

arriving, the conservative speakers received intimidating threats via social media. Nowhere has it been reported that the visiting speakers engaged in offensive speech — just opinions that were less popular or mainstream than that held by others at the university.

What does it mean for public discourse if even at our state's flagship public institution of higher learning, young people cannot engage in safe, healthy and open dialogue with others, presumably, of approximately the same age? If there is one place that is most open as a learning environment, is that not our college campuses here in Hawaii, where we have an island culture that has long valued openness and inclusivity?

As the president and CEO of 'Olelo Community Media, I was disappointed to read about the social-media threat. Of course, issues of free speech continue to bubble in communities across the country. Last month at events celebrating Constitution Day, both U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos warned of the threat to free speech specifically on college campuses.

In the midst of football season, questions about the free speech rights of protesting NFL players continue. Even the U.S. Supreme Court has dealt with issues related to free speech just earlier this year, and may well take up the issue again in coming months.

America will observe national Free Speech Week from Oct. 22 to 28. The annual nonpartisan initiative raises awareness about the importance of free speech in a democracy and to celebrate that inalienable right laid out in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Undoubtedly as citizens of our great country and state, we value our right to exercise free speech. Like surely many in the community, we at 'Olelo also have pondered numerous questions about that right.

How do we best share unpopular or controversial ideas that may be out of the mainstream? What does free speech mean today? Are there appropriate and inappropriate expressions of free speech? And how do we as a society deal with offensive conduct or intimidating behavior meant to muzzle others' right to free speech?

As a member of this community and the democracy that is the United States, we urge you to use your right to free speech and make your voice heard on issues that matter to you. We will all be more informed and our society will be that much fuller and richer when each of us finds our voices unfettered and free from intimidation.

And we are asking our friends and neighbors to put the right to free speech into practice, too: We at 'Olelo would like to encourage the community to come to one of our six neighborhood media service centers across Oahu to record video messages on free speech and what it means.

Each of those messages from people across the island will be aired on 'Olelo channels during Free Speech Week and will be shared with Gov. David Ige, Mayor Kirk Caldwell, the Honolulu City Council and our congressional delegation in Washington, D.C., as well as with the organizers behind national Free Speech Week.

To learn more about free speech and ways to share your views with the community, visit olelo.org.

Sanford Inouye is president/CEO of 'Olelo Community Media.



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