



SOCIETY OF  
PROFESSIONAL  
JOURNALISTS

March 6, 2003

██████████  
Mr. Charles H. Ramsey  
Chief  
Metropolitan Police Department  
300 Indiana Avenue N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20001

*Re: Student Journalist Arrests*

Dear Chief Ramsey:

I am writing to you on behalf of the D.C. Professional Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists, the Student Press Law Center and the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press concerning detention of six student journalists during the IMF protests last fall. The students, who carried credentials from area university newspapers, were attempting to cover the demonstrations when they were rounded up with protesters and held incommunicado. My understanding is that they were fingerprinted and told that if they did not pay the \$50 fine they would be held for arraignment, which might not happen until the following Monday. All but one of them paid the fine, and the one who did not received a citation to appear in the Traffic Division of the Superior Court, where the case was no papered.

These student journalists were not participants in the protests, did not break any laws, and did not impede legitimate law enforcement efforts. The arrests clearly violate the First Amendment rights of the student reporters to gather and disseminate news about the demonstrations involving students from local universities, and in the case of the George Washington University *Hatchet* reporters, events occurring on or near campus. The decision to fingerprint and photograph the student journalists violates MPD general orders concerning processing of individuals cited for civil infractions, including the charges lodged against the student reporters, disobeying a lawful order of a police officer.

We would like to meet with you at your earliest convenience to discuss procedures for ensuring that student journalists will not be detained or arrested while covering news events in Washington, and to establish lines of communication with MPD officials who have authority to locate and release them if they are detained. In addition, we would like you to establish a clear policy for the Metropolitan Police Department prohibiting officers from detaining student or professional journalists who are covering events, and who have violated no laws while doing their jobs.

WASHINGTON, D.C.,  
PROFESSIONAL CHAPTER  
P.O. Box 19555  
WASHINGTON, DC 20036  
(202) 737-3139  
██████████

After this incident I contacted Sgt. Joe Gentile to discuss the MPD's media credential procedures, and we are working with local student newspapers on ways they can ameliorate the difficulty student journalists have in obtaining credentials. Some of the students arrested had applied for MPD press credentials when they returned to school in late August, but they had not yet received them. In the future student editors will apply for credentials in the spring for the next academic year. Reporters for student newspapers in surrounding jurisdictions will apply for credentials issued by their police departments. In addition, SPJ and SPLC will develop a training program for student journalists.

These measures will not eliminate the problems that arose during the IMF protests last fall. It is my understanding that several professional reporters were swept up with the student reporters and protesters. It would appear, therefore, that having MPD press passes isn't enough to protect the right of student reporters to cover such events. The professional reporters were able to secure their release, apparently because they contacted their news organizations on cell phones and quickly obtained legal assistance. But a lawyer representing the *Hatchet* reporters was unable to make contact with any police official with authority to release her clients.

Furthermore, we anticipate that student journalists from colleges and universities outside the Washington area will cover future demonstrations including the one scheduled March 15<sup>th</sup> against the war in Iraq, and events like the IMF protests. Those students probably will have credentials issued by their news outlets, but will not have credentials issued by police in their jurisdictions. Because they are far from home they will not have ready access to legal counsel.

To prevent a repeat of the problems that arose during the IMF protests we need to develop with you a procedure that protects the First Amendment rights of student journalists to report news of great interest to academic communities across the country.

The Society of Professional Journalists is the oldest and largest association in the United States of reporters, editors and news media executives from print and electronic media. The D.C. Professional Chapter includes about 350 journalists who report on national politics and the federal government for media outlets across the country. It has student chapters at American University, GWU and the University of Maryland. These professional and student journalists have a vital interest in protecting the public's right to the free flow of information about events in Washington.

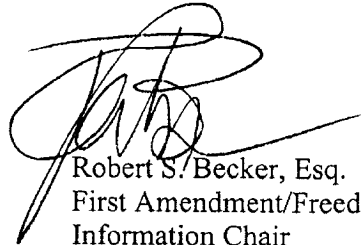
The Student Press Law Center is the nation's only legal assistance agency devoted exclusively to educating high school and college journalists about the rights and responsibilities embodied in the First Amendment and supporting the student news media in their struggle to cover important issues free from censorship. The Center provides free legal advice and information, educational materials for student journalists, and operates an Attorney Referral Network of approximately 150 lawyers across the country who provide free legal representation when necessary. Approximately 2,000 student journalists, teachers and others contact the Center each year for help or information.

The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press is a voluntary, unincorporated association of reporters and editors that works to defend the First Amendment rights and

freedom of information interests of the news media. The Reporters Committee has provided representation, guidance and research in First Amendment and Freedom of Information Act litigation since 1970.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this issue.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Becker', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Robert S. Becker, Esq.  
First Amendment/Freedom of  
Information Chair

cc: Hon. Anthony A. Williams, Mayor  
Hon. Kathy Patterson, Chair, Judiciary Committee, D.C. City Council  
Hon. Roscoe Howard, Esq., United States Attorney for the District of Columbia  
Robert Leger, President, Society of Professional Journalists  
Ann Aughterton, President D.C. Professional Chapter, Society of Professional Journalists  
Mark Goodman, Executive Director, Student Press Law Center  
Lucy Dalglish, Executive Director, Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press