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CITIZEN ADVOCACY CENTER AND AREA HIGH SCHOOLS WELCOME NELI FARAHMANDPOUR, TEEN VOTING ADVOCATE, TO CELEBRATE CONSTITUTION WEEK

A former Stevenson High School student who helped win enactment of “Suffrage at 17” — a law that allows Illinois 17-year-olds to vote in primaries — will be the featured speaker at 2015 Constitution Week events co-sponsored by the Citizen Advocacy Center and area high schools. She will also be speaking at an evening forum to be held at 7 p.m. on Sept. 16, 2015 at the Citizen Advocacy Center office, 182 N. York Street, Elmhurst, Illinois.

Neli Farahmandpour, a 2014 Stevenson graduate, will speak at suburban high schools about the First Amendment’s right to petition as an important thread in the fabric of American democracy.

“I think that everyone is passionate about at least one topic, and I sincerely hope that students across the state can use their constitutional rights to lobby for what they believe in,” said Farahmandpour, currently a freshman at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. “And while that may not always be easy and may involve a lot of time and effort, every single student in Illinois is capable of contributing to changes that they would like to see in our state.”

Observed annually from Sept. 17 to 23, Constitution Week commemorates the signing of the U.S. Constitution on Sept. 17, 1787. Celebrating this event is a way to remember the importance of a document held in esteem worldwide for empowering “We the People” with the rights and responsibilities to engage in the democratic process. In particular, the First Amendment freedoms of speech, press, religion, assembly, and petition are essential to ensure a healthy democracy and hold government accountable.

“Constitution Week recognizes the importance of our founding document by introducing students and adults to constitutional issues through dynamic speakers with firsthand knowledge of what it means to fight for freedom,” said Andrea Alvarez, community lawyer at Citizen Advocacy Center. “Ms. Farahmandpour knows from her own experience the significant role that students can play in creating political change thanks to the First Amendment’s right to petition, and she has a remarkable personal story to share.”
During a summer class before her junior year in high school, Farahmandpour learned about “Suffrage at 17” — a proposal, already law in several other states, that 17-year-olds be permitted to vote in primary elections if they are going to turn 18 by the time of the general election. Her instructor, Stevenson government teacher Andrew Conneen, broached the subject while he took attendance one day.

“He asked a fellow classmate when his birthday was, and the student replied that it was in May,” she said. “I distinctly remember Mr. Conneen turning to him and asking, ‘Now wouldn’t it be great if you were allowed to vote in the primary elections?’ ”

As president of Stevenson’s Law Club, Farahmandpour recognized the potential lobbying power that her classmates could bring on behalf of a bill changing the Illinois voting age for primaries. By early 2013, HB-226 had been introduced in the General Assembly with bipartisan support.

“Stevenson’s Law Club and Political Action Club teamed up to host meetings regarding the proposed law and what it would entail,” Farahmandpour recalled. “In March of 2013, several students from the two clubs went to Springfield to meet with members of the Illinois Senate to lobby for the bill. I had the distinct honor of testifying in front of the Senate Executive Committee, alongside Mr. Conneen, where we were able explain why we thought passing Suffrage at 17 would be so beneficial.”

The House passed the bill in April by a vote of 95-22, and a month later the Senate passed it 43-9. Then-Gov. Pat Quinn signed the measure into law July 3 in a ceremony at Stevenson High School, with Farahmandpour and other students looking on.

“One of the biggest lessons I learned was the value of bipartisan support,” she said. “I don’t think Suffrage at 17 would have passed if we didn’t have support from members belonging to both political parties. I also learned the importance of working together as a community. Everyone worked really hard — not individually but as a team.”

Farahmandpour’s experience with the First Amendment right to petition turned out to be a successful one. She believes other young people can achieve similar success if they’re willing to take the initiative and become engaged in civic life.

“One major point that I would really like to get across to my audiences during Constitution Week is the value of involvement, as well as the effects of persistence,” she said. “I think it is so important for high school students across the state — as well as across the nation — to get involved in civics.”

In previous years, Citizen Advocacy Center has hosted dynamic speakers showcasing other First Amendment freedoms. These include Mary Beth Tinker, free-speech advocate and plaintiff in a landmark Supreme Court student free-speech case, and Jessica Ahlquist, freedom-of-religion advocate and plaintiff in a successful lawsuit challenging her high school’s endorsement of religion.
The Citizen Advocacy Center is a nonprofit, nonpartisan community-based legal organization dedicated to building democracy for the 21st century by increasing the citizenry’s capacities, resources, and institutions for self-governance. For more information, visit www.CitizenAdvocacyCenter.org or call 630-833-4080.

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