



# FORGING A PATH TO POWER

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ANNUAL REPORT 2023



## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

**MY TEXAS** is full of strong, compassionate fighters for social justice who love our neighbors—from Amarillo to Brownsville. We uplift everyone—transgender youth and their families, Texas kids in public schools, neighbors in our border communities, people seeking reproductive healthcare, including abortion, and people of faith and non-faith fighting for religious freedom while preserving the separation of church and state.

These are the values of my Texas—of our Texas.

Yet, in 2023, our state's leaders did everything they could to demolish our shared values, rip apart our communities for their political gain, and project an image of Texas to the rest of the world that screams hate and cruelty while telling vicious lies about who we are and what we need to thrive.

I've been an organizer and advocate in Texas for almost three decades, and I can tell you plainly that our state's leaders have eagerly embraced authoritarianism. Their flagrant disregard for democracy is evident from our legislative session and the specials that followed.

The regular legislative session dealt losses we will be grappling with for decades to come—a ban on lifesaving gender-affirming care for trans youth, violations of religious freedom as well as church and state separation, book censorship, and countless attacks on LGBTQIA+ Texans.

Overwhelming us is their mission—but we cannot let them win. The unmatched fierceness of the powerful grassroots movement built by the staff and supporters of the Texas Freedom

Network keeps me going, and through it all, it is our strength that will carry me into 2024.

We created community and joy in the face of the far-right's attacks—our radical acts of resistance.

Thousands of advocates, community members, clergy, congregants, young Texans, and allies flocked to the Capitol each time we called upon them—lobbying elected officials, raising our voices at sing-ins, rallies, and press conferences, testifying, and dropping cards.

As we close out 2023, I want to thank our supporters for making our vital work possible. You are the people we do this work for, and you are the people we cannot do it without.

For almost 30 years, Texas Freedom Network has been the watchdog of the religious right—protecting schools from censorship, defending religious freedom, and preserving the separation of church and state.

With supporters like you alongside us, I know we will never back down from this fight.

*Val*

Val Benavidez  
TFN President  
(she/ella)



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## JUST TEXAS

*Bridging connections and unity through advocacy among people of faith*

## PROGRESSIVE FAITH LEADERS IN ACTION

Just Texas clergy mobilized Texans of faith and non-faith from across the state for a Sing-In at the Texas Capitol to raise their voices in song and uplift a message of love and celebration of transgender youth and adults. The Sing-In served as a peaceful protest against SB 14 – the bill banning transgender healthcare for minors. Organizer Shan Shaffer stated: “This event showed the importance of advocating against hateful legislation, but also repairing the harm that has been caused by those who weaponize faith.”



Just Texas clergy, faith leaders and partners from the Equality Coalition gathered outside the House Gallery to proclaim: Texans will never stop fighting for the freedoms of the LGBTQIA+ community.

## EXPANDING REPRODUCTIVE FREEDOM CONGREGATIONS

Since 2016, Just Texas has engaged and educated hundreds of faith leaders and congregations in support of reproductive freedom. Reproductive Freedom Congregations vow to trust and respect people who can become pregnant and believe access to comprehensive and affordable reproductive health services, including abortion, is a moral and social good. This year we added three more! Through this program, congregants are creating houses of worship that are free from stigma and shame.



2023 Faith & Justice Award recipients Robbie & Tom Ausley led efforts at FUMC Austin to become a Reproductive Freedom Congregation. Pictured with Board member Stephanie Chiarello at TFN's Liberty Luncheon.



# SECURING EDUCATION QUALITY AND EQUITY FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

Advocating for truthful, censorship-free curricula and textbooks

## RESISTING BOOK BANS

Books are magic. They teach, inspire, comfort, guide, and entertain us. They can challenge our worldview, and transport and connect us to realities that aren't always our own. They build us up, and sometimes, they can reveal our truest selves without judgment. TFN believes this to be true, so as Governor Abbott and the Republican-controlled legislature targeted books that told the stories of BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities, we resisted by reading those books inside *our* Capitol.



Advocates read in the middle of the Texas Capitol rotunda to protest book bans.

## PROMOTING CLIMATE CHANGE STUDIES

TFN collaborated with the National Council for Science Education (NCSE) on a new report, **Grading the Textbooks**, which evaluates the treatment of climate change and evolution in proposed instructional materials submitted by publishers for adoption by the SBOE. A panel of scientists and educators found that nearly all of the new materials – in varying degrees – address these two topics adequately. In November, the State Board of Education considered science textbooks from 22 publishers for adoption in Texas and approved most of them. Eight publishers ultimately failed to get their products on the board's final approved adoption list after Republican members raised personal objections to content related to bias against the fossil fuel industry. Even so, many adopted textbooks will teach students that climate change is real and note the role of human activity, including the burning of fossil fuels. In addition, all of the adopted high school biology textbooks offer a factual account of evolution.

*"It is critical to teach students the truth about climate change, what's causing it, and what we can do about it. This is a crisis they will inherit and have to deal with, both in their personal lives and as voters and leaders, in the decades ahead."*

— CARISA LOPEZ, TFN SENIOR POLITICAL DIRECTOR

## KEEPING PRAGERU OUT OF TEXAS

Since TFN's founding in 1995, we've been the resource of record for monitoring the religious right in Texas. In 2023, we once again sprang into action the minute we found out that a newly elected extremist State Board of Education (SBOE) member was in talks to bring the ultra-right-wing propaganda company PragerU to our schools. We took to our trusted media sources to spread the facts about the company masking its propaganda as educational material, and we filed a request to see all communications between PragerU and any SBOE members. As this controversy continues to unfold, TFN will be there every step of the way.



TFN Political Director joins SBOE members to denounce controversial PragerU curriculum materials.

## MOBILIZING AGAINST VOUCHER SCHEMES

Neighborhood public schools are the heart of every community. They accept all students, regardless of who they are or their background. Instead of supporting our public education system, Governor Abbott chose to push forward his school voucher schemes that divert essential funding to subsidize tuition at unregulated private and religious schools. TFN advocates and legislative champions defeated voucher schemes in the regular legislative session, and the next four special sessions called by Abbott. But we know it's not over as Abbott has promised to endorse pro-voucher candidates and push more legislation attempts to erode our public school system. TFN has stopped vouchers before, and we'll continue our work to do it again.



TFN organized a press conference before delivering close to 5,000 petitions against voucher schemes to legislators.



# TEXAS RISING

Building a movement for young Texans, by young Texans



## ACCESS TO THE BALLOT

Texas Rising fought to recover polling locations at Texas A&M, Huston-Tillotson and Texas Southern University. They secured these wins by testifying at Commissioner Court meetings, lobbying local officials and mobilizing their chapter bases. In Dallas, they worked with partners to ensure polling locations at the county jail, expanding voting rights for those who are eligible to vote. Members are building out the roadmap for democracy from the ground up, registering more than 100,000 young voters since 2016.

## YOUTH JUSTICE AGENDA

Texas Rising mobilized activists for Advocacy Day at the Texas Capitol in support of what matters most to our movement: reproductive freedom, voting rights, LGBTQIA+ equality, religious freedom, climate justice, freedom from censorship in education, and more.

## LOCAL ADVOCACY

Texas Rising activists organized in cities and communities across the state. In El Paso they helped pass progressive resolutions such as International Drag Day and the pro-choice GRACE Act. In Houston, Texas Rising worked closely with coalition partners to increase the budget for the HART program - a win for criminal justice reform.



*"Camp Texas Rising is our flagship leadership development training for young leaders, created by young leaders. Seeing our student leaders lead thoughtful and insightful discussions around social issues that affect their lives, like reproductive justice and immigrant justice, was inspiring."*

— OFELIA ALONSO, TEXAS RISING DIRECTOR

# THANK YOU TO OUR SUPPORTERS!

Fueling TFN's mission through generosity and activism

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\*FREEDOM COUNCIL MEMBERS COMMIT TO AN ANNUAL GIFT OF AT LEAST \$1,000. TO LEARN MORE VISIT [TFN.ORG/FREEDOMCOUNCIL](https://TFN.ORG/FREEDOMCOUNCIL).

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Kenneth Ashworth  
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By Emily Buchanan  
By Bergan Casey  
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By Deedee Ostfeld  
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### IN MEMORY OF

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By Margot Hirsch &  
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