



Another Victory for the First Amendment, This Time in Chicago

Another victory for free speech and the freedom to exercise one's religion [was announced on Tuesday](#). Chicago's City Council has agreed to award four former students from Wheaton College and the law firm representing them more than \$200,000. Lawyers advised the council that the settlement was in the best interests of the city.

Chicago's popular Millennium Park, home of the iconic Cloud Gate statue popularly referred to as "The Bean," is a perfect place to evangelize, as so many people gather there every day.



(vincent desjardins)/flickr
Chicago's Millennium Park

So thought those four students from nearby Wheaton College, who were part of the school's Chicago Evangelism Team. On a Friday night in 2018, they met for dinner, prayed that their witnessing and evangelizing would reap heavenly rewards, took the Metro into the city, and started greeting visitors and handing out Christian tracts at The Bean.

Park officials intervened, claiming that park rules prohibited them from doing so. When one of the students began preaching, he was shut down by park officials.

In attempting to get clarity from the park administration, the four enlisted the help of a local law firm, which agreed to assist them pro bono.

In 2019, the firm filed a suit against the park and the Chicago City Council claiming that its rules violated the students' rights to free speech and freedom of religion under both the First Amendment to the United States Constitution and the Illinois Freedom Restoration Act.

At the time of filing, Matt Swart, one of the four students, said:

We desire to exercise our constitutional right to free speech through sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

For the sake of every citizen who desires to make use of the rights our forefathers bled for, we pray that the City of Chicago amends their unconstitutional code.

The city did amend the code, slightly — but not enough to satisfy the students or their lawyers. The city claimed the park wasn't really a public square but more of a series of artistic "rooms" where First Amendment guarantees somehow didn't apply.

In 2020, in a preliminary injunction against the city, District Court Judge Robert Blakey found that the park's rules were "enforced based on the intention of the speaker and the actual message that they were expressing," and therefore were unconstitutional.



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on April 20, 2023

One of the students said his experience deepened his faith and commitment:

I started to see the way the Bible talks about the Word of God. Jesus says, What you've heard from me, proclaim from the housetops. Jeremiah talks about hearing from God, and he can't hold it in anymore. He said it's like a fire in his bones....

Stuff like that gave me a sense of confidence. [Witnessing to strangers initially was] a little uncomfortable.

That student, Caeden Hood, overcame his initial reluctance and is now studying at Knox Theological Seminary in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. He told *Christianity Today* upon learning of the settlement: "I'm thankful that the Gospel is going to be preached in Millennium Park again.... We just don't want the proclamation of the Gospel to be hindered."

On the surface it appears that the issue is now settled. Students from Wheaton's evangelism team are now free to visit The Bean and witness to others. But R. York Moore, a former evangelist with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship USA who has brought more than 300,000 people to faith in Christ, said that the culture war against Christianity is far from over and such proclamations of the Gospel will continue to be hindered:

As the social perception and policy restrictions continue to push proclamation out of view, Christians will eventually have no choice but to pay a higher price for th[at] proclamation — either as lawbreakers or subversives.



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