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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: 3/16/22

PFLAG SALISBURY STATEMENT ON BOOK BANS

The Executive Board of Salisbury PFLAG has taken note of the wave of challenges and bans of books, especially those written by and about BIPOC and members of the LGBTQ+ community, in schools and libraries across the nation and here on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, and are alarmed. More specifically, this statement responds to challenges in local school libraries to *All Boys Aren't Blue* by George M. Johnson.

Kids need to read books that act as both mirrors (seeing their identities and experiences reflected) and windows (learning about others' identities and experiences.) This means that students need to be able to see themselves and what they are reading as a reflection of themselves, but they also must be encouraged to see outwards and consider perspectives and experiences different from their own. Restricting students' access to materials that focus on LGBTQIA+ issues and books that document the Black experience or the experiences of other BIPOC individuals is irresponsible. The result of exposing teens to only insular and homogenous materials forces them to develop a skewed, inaccurate version of the diversity of our society that extends the disconnect and marginalization of underrepresented groups – particularly LGBTQIA+ students and students of color.

According to a Gallup report released last month, Gen Z is the most diverse generation this country has ever seen, with one in five identifying as LGBTQ+. Further, it is a mistake to think that this diverse generation of high school students are not actively thinking and talking about gender identity, sexual orientation, attraction, and sexual expression. When we deny questioning youth books that reflect gender and sexual diversity or deal with such topics as consent and agency, we are sending a clear message about who is valued and who is not, what is "normal," and what is "taboo." We also may be depriving them of information that is valuable to their sexual health.

According to the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE, 2021)

"We must acknowledge that books lend a voice and language to students who may not have had access to such messages otherwise. Therefore, students of all gender identities and expressions—those who demonstrate those identities visibly while they are in our classes and those who may live their gender more expansively after they leave our classrooms—deserve to see themselves in books and other curricular materials and confirm the wide spectrum of identities that do not exist in a vacuum, but are a part of an ever-growing and changing world."

George M. Johnson's *All Boys Aren't Blue: A Memoir-Manifesto* (2020) is recommended for ages 14-18. It includes the author's reflections on growing up Black and queer was named a 2020 Best Book of the Year by Amazon, Kirkus Reviews, and the New York and Chicago Public Libraries; it was also called the Best Book of the Summer by People magazine and was a Kids' Book Choice Award Finalist. Finally, it has been recognized as a valuable resource for teaching about cultural representation in literature and was listed as a top 10 book of

2020 by the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), a division of the American Library Association. *All Boys Aren't Blue* discusses consent. Johnson uses their personal experience to teach kids about sexual agency, or the ability to make sexual choices free from coercion. The book also addresses sexual abuse and recognizing sexual abuse and handling abuse if it occurs, a topic that is too often ignored in our educational system and which is woefully under-addressed with LGBTQ youth.

Those who wish to censor *All Boys Aren't Blue* are purposefully taking things out of context to be salacious. Further, they are seeking to push a white heterosexual status quo that is not reflective of the fabric of our community on Delmarva. According to the author "Books with heavy topics are not going to harm children. Children still have to exist in a world full of these heavy topics and are going to be affected by them whether they read the book or not. Having [this] book though, gives them the tools, the language, the resources and the education so that when they are having to deal with a heavy topic, they have a roadmap for how to handle it."

According to a recent statement by the American Library Association

"In recent months, a few organizations have advanced the proposition that the voices of the marginalized have no place on library shelves. To this end, they have launched campaigns demanding the censorship of books and resources that mirror the lives of those who are gay, queer, or transgender or that tell the stories of persons who are Black, Indigenous, or persons of color. Falsely claiming that these works are subversive, immoral, or worse, these groups induce elected and non-elected officials to abandon constitutional principles, ignore the rule of law, and disregard individual rights to promote government censorship of library collections. Some of these groups even resort to intimidation and threats to achieve their ends, targeting the safety and livelihoods of library workers, educators, and board members who have dedicated themselves to public service, informing our communities, and educating our youth."

If we were to remove all books with sexual content from school libraries, we would lose other beloved coming-of-age memoirs like the *Diary of Anne Frank* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*; many popular teen bestsellers, like the works of Judy Blume and John Green, would have to go as well. We would also have to get rid of classics such as *The Great Gatsby*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Students have the right to have access to knowledge and stories. This is the very purpose of libraries, which exist as gateways to knowledge and culture. Salisbury PFLAG, a chapter of the largest Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning/Queer (LGBTQ) ally organization in the nation envisions a world where diversity is celebrated and all people are respected, valued, and affirmed inclusive of their sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. Accordingly, we condemn attempts to ban books featuring LGBTQIA+ characters from school library shelves.