

['Stand up for our democracy': Voting rights activist John Bonifaz keynote speaker during Law Day event](#)

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GREENFIELD — Middle and high school students from across the county gathered at the Franklin County Justice Center on Wednesday to learn about the importance of democracy and the laws involved with protecting it.

President Dwight Eisenhower established Law Day, which takes place annually on May 1, in 1958 to celebrate the law's role in maintaining a free society. This year, the American Bar Association chose "Voices of Democracy" as a theme for its Law Day programs in an effort to educate the public on the importance of a fair democratic system prior to the election year, Northwestern District Attorney David Sullivan said.

"Every election is important. We need people to understand our poll processes and how issues that are discussed in an honest, forthright way, are important," Sullivan said. "We want to make sure that the candidates that win are supported in their efforts to make our country community."

The event's keynote speaker, constitutional law scholar and voting rights activist John Bonifaz addressed the students, listing voter suppression, insurrection and big money in politics as the three most prominent threats to democracy today.

Bonifaz outlined the history of voting rights in the United States from the nation's inception, in which only white men were able to legally vote, to the enactment of the 19th Amendment that allowed women to vote and the 24th Amendment, which allowed Americans of all races to vote. He also discussed the 26th Amendment, which brought the voting age down from 21 to 18.

"We have been engaged in a fight for two centuries now to expand our democracy and expand the right to vote," Bonifaz said. "This fight definitely continues today. There are forces in this country that do not want to have a multi-racial voting system ... they want to suppress the vote, they want to intimidate voters from voting. That fight means that we do believe in democracy, we believe that all people ought to have the right to vote."

Bonifaz also referenced factions of the population propagating unsubstantiated claims of mass voter fraud in the 2020 presidential election. He said the groups, some of which were armed, went door-to-door to ask about residents' voting records during the election, an action that he considers to be voter intimidation.

After speaking about false claims of voter fraud, Bonifaz segued into discussing the Jan. 6 Capitol riot, which he said marked the country's second insurrection in history after the American Civil War.

“Donald Trump was challenging the results of an election, and each and every one of those cases he lost. He argued that there was fraud and he lost that argument. Recognizing that he was losing in those court cases, he incited and mobilized the second insurrection,” Bonifaz said.

He referenced a section of the 14th Amendment that bars anyone who took an oath of office and engaged in an insurrection from running for office, noting that although multiple states used the law to remove President Donald Trump from the ballot, the Supreme Court ultimately overruled the states’ decisions.

“This is a nonpartisan question. ... This is a rule of law question, it’s a democracy question,” said Bonifaz, who disagrees with the Supreme Court’s decision. “My message to you today is wherever you are in your life ... stand up for what you believe in and to stand up for our democracy. You have a voice in this process. You have a right to speak up.”

As the Law Day attendees streamed out of the courthouse on Wednesday, Jordyn Gilmore, an eighth grader at Mohawk Trail Regional School, said she “learned a lot about the justice system,” along with democracy and the court system, at the event.

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