

Free Speech under Attack in Rural America

I'm standing here in this drab Utah courtroom. The verdict is about to be read. In a moment, I'll discover my fate. My mind flashes back to July 23, 2022. Beaver County. Main Street Park. I'm handing out leaflets. Two of my colleagues at the animal rights organization [Direct Action Everywhere](#) (DxE) are months away from standing trial for rescuing two piglets from Smithfield Foods Circle Four Farms. I'm having polite conversations with people about the upcoming trial and Smithfield. Officers Sgt. Warren Woolsey and Deputy Sheriff Lonnie Laws tell me I'm "not wanted in this community" and should leave immediately. They're telling people not to speak to me. For peacefully exercising my legal right to free speech, I end up charged with trespass and disorderly conduct. My mind flashes back to the present, and the word rings in my ears: "Guilty."

During my time in Utah, I found people willing to have open and honest discussions. They were friendly and welcoming. Why, then, are high ranking members of the Church and the police attempting to stop that from happening? What are they trying to hide? Could it be that egregious abuses documented by DxE at Smithfield were getting too close to those in power? When open dialogue threatens a power structure, it's time to scrutinize that power structure. This guilty verdict has only invited that investigation.

So let's start with what we know: The judge in my case, Judge [Shadrach Bradshaw](#), is a former dairy farmer who never went to law school. Sgt. Woolsey made clear that he saw me as "not welcome" in this community because, as he told passersby, I was one of the people "trying to shut down Smithfield," making it clear that it was my personal viewpoint that he objected to. Of the four witnesses called at trial, at least three are known to be members of the Church of Latter-Day Saints. Dr. Lance Smith, the highest ranking Church member in Beaver; Mayor Matthew Robinson, who worked for Smithfield for years, is a member of the Church; and Brent Blackner, a member of the Church and former city manager who was [accused](#) of misusing public funds. Does the Church then have an interest in stopping an exercise in free speech? I wonder: If members of the Church were in another community trying to peacefully educate the public about their religion, what would they think if they were prevented from doing so by authorities calling out views they found to be bigoted? I would think they would view that as a violation of their free speech. And they'd be correct.

The fourth witness, Officer Tyler Schena, is also a member of the Beaver City Council. Is all of this starting to paint a picture? **There are inextricable links between those in power in Beaver with Smithfield Foods and the Church, and a clear interest for those in power in silencing people exposing abuses by any one of those pillars of power, much less all three. But I will not be silenced.**

Regarding the charges I was convicted of, neither of them apply. The land was leased as a public park, therefore I was on public property and I had every right to exercise my right to free speech. So I did not "trespass." Nor is there any evidence of "disorderly conduct." Not a single witness prosecutors presented described me as "disorderly" in the least. Quite the opposite. I was described as "cordial" and "not unruly." Is knowing my rights and standing firm with that

knowledge “disorderly conduct?” You be the judge. A [video](#) on the popular police accountability YouTube channel “Audit the Audit” breaks down the interaction in detail. It’s gotten 2.7 million views and my guess is this guilty verdict might get it a few more.

I was ordered to pay \$850. The prosecutors and judge probably hoped that would be the end of the matter. It won’t. I am appealing this decision and we’ll see if a judge without such obvious biases rules in a more sensible manner. Either way, I welcome all the additional attention this guilty verdict has brought in exposing the corruption that is so pervasive in Beaver County as well as the animal abuse that has continued unabated at Smithfield Foods pig killing facilities in Utah and around the world.

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