

LIBERTY

Teaching Liberty to Today's Students in Unconventional Ways

By William Mattox

IT ISN'T EVERYDAY THAT A FREE-MARKET THINK TANK USES A clip from *Ellen* to illustrate an idea. Or partners with the “mainstream media” to deliver content to students attending “government schools.” Or offers moral support to foreign-born strangers testifying in a U.S. courthouse.

Yet, the James Madison Institute (JMI) has done all of these things. Proudly. And when you hear the explanation behind each of our curious actions, you just might want to go out and do something that (at first blush) seems equally suspicious.

THE ELLEN EPISODE

Several years ago, a young Florida teen named Willow Tufano started selling used goods on Craigslist. Over the course of an 18-month period, she earned and saved \$6,000. One night, Willow overheard her mother talking about a house nearby that had once been valued at \$100,000, but was now being offered in a short sale for much less. "I'd like to buy that house," 14-year-old Willow announced. And buy it she did. For a mere \$12,000. Consequently, Willow now has tenants more than twice her age paying her \$700 in rent each month (which she's using to buy out her Mom who put up half the money for the home purchase).

Needless to say, Willow's story is one JMI loves to tell. We've written about her in a *USA TODAY* op-ed, featured Willow in several of our publications, and made her the focal point of a short film (which generated fan mail from Florida Gov. Rick Scott). That short film begins, interestingly, with a clip of liberal icon Ellen DeGeneres making a fuss over Willow on her TV show, *Ellen*.

Now, we don't fault Ellen for celebrating this remarkable teenager (even though, ahem, Willow's earnings place her in the top 1 percent of all teenage homeowners). Indeed, we believe Willow's story helps illustrate a point JMI is always looking to make—time-honored virtues like hard work, self-reliance, and entrepreneurial spunk never really go out of style. Why, even the avant-garde will often go ga-ga when they see these traits displayed in compelling stories like Willow's.

PARTNERING WITH THE "MAINSTREAM MEDIA"

One of the JMI publications featuring Willow's story is a booklet on the wise use of money called *All About the Benjamins*. Produced in association with the News-in-Education departments at Florida's major newspapers, this JMI publication goes out to Florida public schools every January



Willow Tufano - Entrepreneur

JMI

during Thrift Week. To date, more than 600,000 copies of this 12-page tabloid—and another JMI produces for Celebrate Freedom Week in September—have been distributed to Florida high school students.

Some people find it surprising that JMI would partner with the "mainstream media" to produce publications distributed to "government

What Thrift Is (And What It's Not)

REAL THRIFT
is the saving and intelligent use of
HEALTH
TIME
and
PROPERTY
of all kinds, including
MONEY

thrift – n, the wise use of economic resources (including one's time, talent, and treasure)

The Thrift Ethic

EARN All You Can
SAVE All You Can
GIVE All You Can

"Thrift Helps Everyone Thrive"

JAMES MADISON INSTITUTE
www.jamesmadison.org

Misers, Tightwads & Scrooges
Get all they can, keep all they can, and then sit on the can.

What a Waste!

Spendaholics & Chronic Debtors
Get all they can, spend all they can, and then spend their lives owing The Man.

What Bondage!

DEBT

Thrifty People
Work as hard as they can, spend as carefully as they can, and then share as generously as they can.

What Fulfillment!

JMI Thrift Week Leaflet

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schools.” But we see nothing peculiar here. America’s founding principles ought to be taught in every public school. They belong in mainstream newspapers. And they ought to be tied to more recent debates in American life—which is why *Celebrate Freedom* notes that Martin Luther King, Jr., invoked the Founders in his “I Have a Dream” speech. And why *All About the Benjamins* upholds numerous 20th century paragons of thrift, including Florida educator Mary McLeod Bethune, U.S. President Calvin Coolidge, and Gatorade creator Robert Cade.

SUPPORTING FOREIGN-BORN STRANGERS

In addition to providing *Celebrate Freedom* to Florida students, JMI also distributes these booklets to new citizens taking part in naturalization ceremonies in our state. “This is a small way that we can affirm their decision to become naturalized citizens,” says JMI Executive Vice President Becky Liner. And it’s also a good way for JMI to seize a “teachable moment” for area students.

JMI periodically sponsors a special program in which native-born high school students learn about the naturalization process, take the citizenship test that immigrants must pass in order to become U.S. citizens, attend a naturalization ceremony with JMI leaders, and then interact with the new citizens at a celebratory reception afterwards.

“Many of the students that take part in this program come away with a newfound respect for those whom Ronald Reagan liked to call ‘Americans by choice,’” reports JMI president Bob McClure. “I think the students also leave with a newfound appreciation for what it means to be an American.”

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM (ACCORDING TO A CANADIAN)

Naturalization ceremonies aren’t the only places where JMI seeks to cultivate students’ apprecia-

tion for American ideals. Throughout the year, JMI hosts seminars and book clubs for college students, sponsors “Madison Movie Nights” (showing liberty-themed films) on college campuses, and provides speakers for Boys State, Girls State, Constitution Day, and other occasions.

One of our most popular speakers on American Exceptionalism is a Canadian—The Heritage Foundation’s own David Azerrad. “David’s enthusiasm for America’s founding principles is infectious,” Liner notes. “And students often find it interesting to hear a Canadian marveling at the Founders’ genius.”

While most of JMI’s civic education programs are designed to reach high school and college students, we do use historical re-enactors periodically to put on educational programs for younger students. In fact, one of JMI’s most-celebrated programs is a fun-filled historical quiz game featuring a Ben Franklin impersonator. First played at a Thrift Week event in rural Franklin County, “R U Smarter than a Franklin County 5th Grader?” has now been played at elementary school assemblies and home-school conventions all over Florida.

OFFBEAT? MORE LIKE UPBEAT

While some of JMI’s methodologies for reaching students may not fit the mold of what free-market think tanks normally do, the true tenor of our work is upbeat more than offbeat. We believe America’s founding ideals are remarkable. We think liberty ought to be celebrated. And we aren’t afraid to try new ways to communicate these ideas to young people.

Maybe that explains why we’ve used a clip from *Ellen*, partnered with the “mainstream media,” offered moral support to foreign-born strangers, and done all sorts of curious things. Proudly.

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