



Defending the Constitution: George Christian '67

Last July, after the FBI phoned his office at Library Connection in Windsor, CT, George Christian, Class of 1967, says a "good cop, bad cop" team of agents—a neatly dressed young man with blazer and tie and a partner who was a much more robust man with a spandex shirt that revealed exactly how robust he was—arrived to hand-deliver a letter. The organization, which manages a complex computer network that runs circulation systems for 27 Hartford-area libraries, had been issued a National Security Letter (NSL) by the FBI, requesting all information available about the user of a specified IP address during a 60-minute period six months earlier. After careful review, Christian, a man of strong convictions, felt it was his duty not only to protect the privacy of the users but to protect the core values of the Constitution that he felt the letter's request was violating.

Since taking a required course on constitutional law at Trinity, Christian has been keenly aware of, and interested in, the rights and responsibilities protected under this country's founding document. The letter, while similar to a subpoena or warrant, never underwent the standard process of judicial review—an egregious violation of the Constitution. Having never heard of these letters before because of the perpetual gag order that accompanies them—prohibiting the receiver from speaking to anyone at all about the document—Christian was immediately suspect. Furthermore, he was concerned that he was being asked to hand over information about

library patrons whose privacy was protected under Connecticut legislation. Connecticut is one of 48 states with important legislation that charges librarians to protect patron privacy, and Christian took his position as gatekeeper to that information very seriously.

Despite the gag order associated with the letter, Christian decided to seek advice from a three-member executive committee acting on behalf of the board of Library Connection to protest the government's request. He explains his decision, "My son was studying constitutional law at school. I wanted to set an example for what I believed was right." Christian has always been one to stand up for what he believes in. During the Vietnam War, he wrote a letter stating his beliefs against what he called "a civil war," and was granted, under highly unlikely circumstances for a Roman Catholic, conscientious-objector status. "My argument was that I didn't believe the government had the right to tell me that it was o.k. to kill people," Christian explains.

In his most recent case against the government, he took a similarly steadfast approach. *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* reported that since 9-11, 30,000 National Security Letters a year have been issued by the FBI, and that Library Connection is only the second organization ever to contest compliance with the letter in court. Christian and his colleagues also sought an immediate lifting of the gag order in order to testify before Congress while the renewal of the Patriot Act and its NSL provision were being debated. The Justice Department opposed this at the Appellate Court and even at a review by Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, only relenting after the Patriot Act was renewed. According to Christian the positive changes in the renewed act are very modest. NSLs now have to state that recipients can consult an attorney, but the gag provisions have been revised to make successfully contesting them much more difficult.

"Many people have said to me since this began that if I've got nothing to hide, then why fight it," says Christian. He responds with the poignant words of Benjamin Franklin, "Those who would sacrifice liberty to gain security deserve neither."

by Carlin Carr