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ORLANDO, FL - The First Amendment Foundation has named James W. Schwartzel, president of Sun Broadcasting, as the recipient of the 2023 Pete Weitzel Friend of the First Amendment award in recognition of his stand to the Florida legislature on behalf of free speech and the media.

“By being the first conservative news station owner to oppose legislation that would have made it easier for the rich and powerful to sue their critics in Florida, Jim stood up to defend the rights of the press and free speech of all Floridians,” said Bobby Block, executive director of the First Amendment Foundation, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that defends the provision of the first article of the U.S. Bill of Rights.

“Jim’s courage paved the way for other broadcasters, politicians and opponents to criticize the move. Many were initially reluctant to oppose a bill that had the governor’s blessing. But the public outcry stirred by Jim ultimately led to the proposed law stalling and dying in the House and the Senate. Because of his outspoken defense of freedom, we are pleased to name Jim, Friend of the First Amendment.

HB991 and its Senate counterpart would have turned Florida into the libel tourism destination of the United States. It would have frozen public debate and free speech, impacting not just the traditional print and broadcast media, but all media across the political spectrum, including social media, book publishing, entertainment programming, and even theater and satire.

Schwartzel’s willingness to speak out was critical to marshaling widespread opposition to these unconstitutional efforts.

The award was presented to Schwartzel on June 6 at a ceremony in Orlando.

Accepting the award, Schwartzel said standing up against the legislation ultimately wasn’t that hard. “It’s the First

Amendment! It's the foundation of what we do as journalists and what we do in talk radio. It's what we do in Florida."

A Southwest Florida native, Schwartzel attended Stetson University, graduating with a degree in finance. He joined the family broadcasting business in Fort Myers 25 years ago. For the past decade, he has led Sun Broadcasting into acquiring additional television and radio stations and a publishing company.

In a letter to the legislature, Schwartzel warned that the proposed law would lead to the "death of conservative talk" in Florida because it would expose hosts and stations to a string of defamation lawsuits. He also criticized a provision of the legislation that would stop news outlets from using confidential informants by presuming anonymous statements in stories to be false.

"Freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly—these bedrock principles transcend any single party or ideology. We commend Jim Schwartzel for fearlessly speaking out against a terrible bill that posed a serious threat to robust public discourse," said Trimmel Gomes, chair of the First Amendment Foundation Board of Trustees. "Schartzel's unwavering commitment to safeguarding the longstanding protections of the news media in their coverage of government and public officials is critical in an era marked by persistent attempts to erode the public's right to know."

The Friend of the First Amendment Award was created in 1995 to recognize the significant contribution to free speech, free press and open government. The award is named for Pete Weitzel, former managing editor of The Miami Herald, and founder, past president, and current director emeritus of the First Amendment Foundation. The award is given annually to recognize a significant contribution to the protection of the First Amendment and open government.

Past recipients include House Speaker Peter Rudy Wallace, Senate President Jim Scott, Senate President Toni Jennings, former Chief Justice Gerald Kogan, Attorney General Bob Butterworth, Sen. Locke Burt, Rep. Fred Brummer, Rep. John Carassas, Rep. Doug Wiles, FSU President Sandy D'Alemberte, Gov. Charlie Crist, Rep. Dan Gelber, Pat Gleason, Sen. Paula Dockery, Sen. Mike Fasano, and Sen. Joe Negron.

The Florida First Amendment Foundation was founded nearly four decades ago as a nonpartisan organization that advocates for freedom of speech, assembly and press enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, as well as for open government and public records access enshrined in the Florida constitution and statute. We believe these rights are critical to citizen trust and involvement in our democratic society.

For more information on the Foundation, its awards, programs, membership and

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