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Standing up for free speech

By Kelly Rinehart

I am a lifelong Oklahoman and successful interior design entrepreneur. Yet, an unfortunate law recently enacted now threatens my livelihood—along with countless others throughout the state—by denying designers our First Amendment right to honestly tell people what we do for a living.

I knew that I wanted to be an interior designer from a young age. As a teenager, I was so inspired by a local design company that I offered to work for them free. They accepted and I went to work every day after school. I loved it.

In high school, my creativity and communications skills—both essential aspects of interior design—developed to the point that I traveled around the state participating in competitions as part of a program that teaches young people how to be successful. I won a competition held at Oklahoma State University, and shortly afterward, was recruited by OSU to enter its design program.

I graduated with an interior design degree in 1995 and have been working in the field ever since. In 2003, when I opened my own business, my goal was to continue building relationships with my clients and developing abilities and knowledge gained at OSU. I now run a successful design firm with clients around the country and overseas.

Despite my years of experience, college

degree and successful business, I am being told by the state of Oklahoma that unless I pass an expensive national exam and then pay the government for a license, I can no longer call myself an interior designer. It's even illegal for me to accurately describe what I do on my business cards and letterhead.

Only individuals with government-issued licenses may call themselves "interior designers" in Oklahoma. This "titling" law is part of a national effort by a powerful group of industry insiders who want to cartelize the industry by controlling who can advertise—and ultimately practice—in interior design. Their efforts have been exposed in Newsweek magazine and other national publications.

Oklahomans don't need to pass the CPA exam to work in the accounting profession or truthfully advertise accounting services. Of course, they are free to take the CPA exam if they choose. Why doesn't such a common-sense approach apply to designers?

In all my years of work, not one client has ever asked me whether I've taken a special government-licensing exam. I'm offended that the state thinks I'm unfit to speak without first gaining its permission. Laws like these are unconstitutional. Simply put, I have a right to work and speak as an interior designer without being subject to discriminatory regulations.

That is why Tuesday I joined with two other interior designers and the Institute for Justice, a national public interest law firm that defends free speech and the rights of entrepreneurs, to challenge Oklahoma's interior design titling law in federal court.

We seek to vindicate not only our rights, but those of all Oklahomans.

Rinehart owns an interior design firm in Warr Acres.