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***Press Announcement May 29, 2013***

**Free Speech and Religious Liberty Advocate Susan Watson to Lead the ACLU of Alabama.**

The ACLU of Alabama’s Board of Directors has announced the appointment of Susan Watson, as the new executive director of the statewide civil liberties organization based in Montgomery. Watson, formerly with the ACLU of Florida, succeeds Olivia Turner, who served the ACLU of Alabama for 26 years.

“I am honored and humbled to expand the work of the ACLU in a state where the civil rights movement began,” said Watson “I will work tirelessly to protect the freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution and Bill of Rights for the people of Alabama.

The ACLU’s work in Alabama began in 1934, when the organization raised money to defend the Scottsboro Boys. In the 1950s and ’60s, the ACLU worked closely with the NAACP in support of the civil rights movement. In 1965, the ACLU established affiliates in many Deep South states, including the ACLU of Alabama. The Alabama affiliate continues to protect the rights of people most vulnerable to civil liberties violations, recently standing up for immigrants and minorities, women, prison inmates and people with HIV/AIDS. The organization defends religious liberty, free speech, workers’ rights, and legal due process for all, among other constitutional principles

The ACLU of Alabama’s new executive director describes herself as a community activist at heart. Watson helped revive the Panhandle chapter of the ACLU of Florida in 2000 and served as northwest Florida’s regional director for the last eight years.

Watson first got involved with the ACLU as a plaintiff in a 1999 lawsuit opposing Governor Jeb Bush’s school voucher program, which, the suit argued, unconstitutionally diverted taxpayer money to religious schools. The ACLU opposes voucher programs because they erode the separation of church and state, which undermines true religious freedom. The Florida Supreme Court agreed and threw out the voucher program.

Watson also made headlines when she accused Florida’s Escambia County School Board member Vanette Webb of stonewalling public records requests, which led to Webb’s conviction and temporary removal from office. These victories and other issues led Watson and a group of local civil libertarians to create bylaws for a Panhandle ACLU chapter in 2000.

Watson joined the ACLU of Florida’s board and later served on its executive committee. When the organization opened a permanent office in Pensacola in 2005, Watson was appointed as regional director.

One of the early cases at the Pensacola office was on behalf of a student in Ponce de Leon, Florida, who had been prohibited from wearing rainbow stickers in support of gay rights, and a T-shirt that said “I Support My Gay Friends.” A federal judge ruled that the student’s First Amendment rights had been illegally violated and enjoined the Holmes County School District from censoring similar forms of student expression.

The most notable case during Watson’s tenure in Pensacola was the 2008 lawsuit against the Santa Rosa County School District on behalf of two student plaintiffs. The suit alleged that school leaders used their government positions to promote their personal religious beliefs in the public schools and at school events. Promoting one religion over another in public school is unconstitutional because it threatens religious diversity. U.S. District Court Judge Casey Rodgers ruled in favor of the plaintiffs and ordered school district employees to stop proselytizing to students.

“Susan Watson comes to us with a strong record of accomplishments for the Florida ACLU,” states Christine Freeman, ACLU of Alabama President. “Our previous director achieved notable successes in Alabama.  Ms. Watson will continue the ACLU's successful efforts to enforce the Bill of Rights for all people in Alabama."

**About the ACLU of Alabama:** The ACLU of Alabama is freedom’s watchdog, working daily in the courts, legislature and throughout Alabama to defend individual rights and personal freedoms guaranteed by the United States and Alabama Constitutions and the Bill of Rights.  For additional information, visit our web site at: [www.aclualabama.org](http://www.aclualabama.org)