



2500 College Drive  
P.O. Box 428  
Rock Springs, WY 82902-0428  
[www.wbcc.cc.wy.us](http://www.wbcc.cc.wy.us)

**Contact:** Carma Corra, Public Information Officer  
**Office Phone:** (307) 382-1661 or 875-4440, ext. 1661  
**Home Phone:** (307) 362-7380  
**Cell Phone:** (307) 871-5937  
**Fax:** (307) 382-1636 or 382-1654  
**E-mail:** ccorra@wbcc.wy.edu

# News Release

**News Release Number: NR6042CC**  
**Date: October 25, 2006**  
**For Immediate Release**

## **Original WWCC musical changes perspectives with important message**

**Creative team includes award-winning playwright/lyricist, composer**

Rock Springs\_\_\_Musical theater students are singing some new tunes in the halls of Western Wyoming Community College. Double meaning intended.

Performers in the upcoming original Broadway-style musical *First Freedom*, the students are voicing not just the fresh, upbeat music but also a brand new perspective on

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religious freedom in the U.S.—“the *first* freedom”—and the separation of church and state.

“When the students first saw the script, they snored,” admits *First Freedom* director Jamie Young, head of WWCC’s musical theater and dance department. “But by the third rehearsal, they were so excited. They recognized the play’s importance and the great opportunity to spread its message.”

Both Young, who contracted with executive producer Larry Sidwell of Charlottesville, Va., to direct the play, and Sam Cardon of Salt Lake City, who was hired to create the music, said their own first reactions were similar. “I didn’t think the historical material was fodder for an entertaining musical,” said Cardon, an Emmy Award-winning composer whose credits include the original music for the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympic Games Closing Ceremonies and the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics; the films *Texas*, *The Big Picture*, *Lewis and Clark*, *Mysteries of Egypt*, *Olympic Glory*, *Whales*, *Treasure of the Gods at Zion National Park* and more; and the themes for “National Geographic Explorer,” “ABC Sunday Night at the Movies,” and “Good Morning America.”

But something magical happened when Sidwell, Cardon, Young and Rob Lauer, the award-winning New York City playwright and lyricist hired to write the script, met. “I’ve been involved with a number of musical theater projects before and this one has definitely been the most pleasant. Creatively, we’re all on the same page. We have a unified vision,” Cardon said. “I didn’t know the particulars of this story—I took it for

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granted. But there is a big concept at work here. It feels significant and important.”

*First Freedom* is Sidwell’s vision. A native of Jerome, Idaho, he graduated from the Air Force Academy, served in Vietnam, became an American Airlines pilot after retiring from the Air Force, began raising goats with his wife on a dairy goat farm in Virginia, published the 2002 book *Hold to the Dream*, a compilation of poignant and humorous articles he submitted to the dairy goat trade journal *United Caprine News* during an 11-year period, and gave tours at Monticello, the home of Thomas Jefferson. His history does not include theatrical or production involvement.

Sidwell’s work at Monticello, however, sparked his deep interest in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom drafted by Jefferson and the subsequent push by James Madison to have it adopted by the Virginia State Legislature in 1786. Both future presidents argued that religious beliefs should be solely matters of individual conscience and completely immune from any interference by the state and that religious activity should be wholly voluntary. They also opposed taxing people to support an established church and objected to forcing people to pay taxes even for their own church. Jefferson believed that a high wall of separation should always keep church and state apart and directed that on his tombstone he should not be remembered as president of the United States or for any of the other high offices he held, but as the author of the Declaration of Independence and the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom and as the founder of the University of Virginia.

A devout Christian, Sidwell said his research helped him understand why

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members of other religions or groups might object to a nativity scene or the Ten Commandments on a courthouse lawn. He also began to dream about creating a Broadway-style musical to chronicle the 10-year struggle by the two future U.S. presidents to get the statute adopted. Still part of modern Virginia's constitution, the statute became the basis for the Religion Clauses in the Constitution's Bill of Rights and serves as a model for countries throughout the world.

“This project is Larry’s vision. He is the only reason it has survived. It is seeing the light of day now only because Larry refused to give up. This is a big deal,” Cardon said. In 2002 and 2003, Sidwell involved some of his friends, created a non-profit organization, enlisted a board of directors, solicited funding and launched a search for a writer, director, lyricist and composer. Although he advertised nationally for some of those positions, Lauer, Cardon and Young are partners in the project today because Sidwell knew somebody who knew somebody who knew at least one of them.

In Lauer, winner of the 1982 Mayhew Award for his first play *Digger*, the 1990 Deep South Writers Conference Best Play Award for the satire *Tom and Penny’s Yard Party* and the 1990 Paul T. Nolan Award for *The Church Street Fantasy*, Sidwell got “a two-fer.” Sidwell gave Lauer, also a history scholar, “about 25 books to read before he wrote the script and I think he read another 25.” Then, when Lauer handed in his completed script, he also provided song lyrics. A feature on Lauer is forthcoming.

In addition to writing *First Freedom*, Lauer is working as a guest artist with the WWCC Musical Theatre and Dance department during the entire 2006-07 academic year.

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He directed the college's recent production of *Guys and Dolls* and is also writing music for a future WWCC production of *Little Women*.

Cardon, at WWCC in late October along with Sidwell, is finishing up the music for *First Freedom*'s November performances. "The basic building blocks are done," he said. "Rob and Sam are both phenomenal and every day is exciting," Young added.

All four men say their *First Freedom* involvement has changed them dramatically and will change audience members as well. "People will go to this, learn something and not even realize it because they will be entertained," Cardon said. "At first, people will relate to the antagonist, Patrick Henry. The protagonist, Madison, sees things more deeply. But hopefully, by the end, people will see things the way Madison did," said Young. "It's pretty amazing that we four devout Christians came around to Madison's viewpoint," Cardon added.

Lack of creative ego seems to be a common trait among the four. "I watched Jamie and Rob tweaking the script and nobody cared who got the credit," Cardon said. "I didn't always agree but we always came to consensus. I was interested in entertainment and Rob was protective of the integrity of the history," Young added. "All of these men contributed much more than they've been compensated for," said Sidwell, adding that Young, another "two-fer," is *First Freedom*'s choreographer as well as director.

As for the student performers, Cardon expressed surprise at their "top drawer" work. "Wyoming has a reputation as the Wild West. You don't expect there to be a great theater tradition," he said. "(Student) Rick Rea does what I do—he's incredible. I didn't

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have his skills at his age. And Beau Brewster who plays Madison—I don't know that you could find a more perfect actor.”

All four also agree that the musical deserves a national stage. “WWCC is the testing ground. Then we need to find a market where the show can be accessed by millions of people,” Sidwell said. With the cost of launching a Broadway production in the \$20 million range, cities such as Williamsburg, Va., and Roanoke Rapids, N.C.—the new Branson, Mo.—are being considered. And other future collaborative projects remain a strong possibility.

In the meantime, the world premiere of *First Freedom* will take place at 7:30 p.m. Nov. 10 [**Friday**] in the WWCC Theatre. The show is also scheduled at 7:30 p.m. Nov. 11, 16, 17 and 18 and at 9:30 a.m. Nov. 14 and 15. Adult tickets are \$9 and student and senior tickets are \$5. Call 382-1600 for more information.

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**Photo Cutline:** Emmy Award-winning composer Sam Cardon of Salt Lake City plays some of his original music for the November world premiere of *First Freedom* at Western Wyoming Community College. With him, from left, are *First Freedom* collaborators Larry Sidwell of Charlottesville, Va., the executive producer and project creator; Jamie Young, director and choreographer as well as WWCC Musical Theatre and Dance Department director; and Rob Lauer of New York City, scriptwriter and lyricist and yearlong WWCC visiting artist.

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