

President's Page--Citizen Lawyer

by Thomas J. Ryan

All in a democracy, who are able, have a responsibility to participate in government.

(Aristotle)

After a recent 4th of July celebration, I read an account of an auditorium full of new citizens being sworn in. The reporter wrote that these citizens came from many different countries and circumstances, all with a common goal of a better life in our country. To become citizens, each of them had to study our history, our special form of government, and take a written exam—a citizenship test.

The first citizenship test was the courage of the founders, who declared their independence on that first 4th of July more than 200 years ago. This was no hollow declaration, as they fought and gave their lives in the first real citizenship test that created our nation.

Since then, Americans have been faced with many tests that have forged this nation and the freedom we enjoy today. Often these tests have involved men and women risking and sacrificing their lives. The Revolutionary War gave birth to this nation, the Civil War bound it together, and the World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam extended beyond our borders the concept of freedom through self-government.

Fortunately, we are confronted with few, if any, such life-threatening tests today. However, we face a more subtle threat to our way of life, the increasing lack of participation in the self-governing process. Apathy, Alexis-de-Tocqueville observed, is the weakness, the greater threat from within, of our experiment in democracy.

It is fortunate for many native-born citizens that they are not required to take the same written exam naturalized citizens must pass. Many of our citizens do not have rudimentary knowledge of our basic system of government and how it operates. Many of our citizens, because they do not understand or take an interest in the workings of government, fail to vote in elections and are cynical of authority. Many adamantly proclaim their rights, but do not wish to be bothered by their duties and responsibilities to our system of government.

As lawyers, we know that these days people are very focused on their rights. Yet, too often many people have lost the significance of what it means to be a good citizen. Although many understand their rights, they do not understand or accept the corresponding duties and responsibilities of citizenship.

Throughout the history of this country and state, lawyers have been instrumental in creating and improving the important institutions that help preserve our freedoms. Even today, lawyers can be found in every aspect of public policy activities, in and out of government, at every level, and in every branch of government.

To be sure, many have made these same observations before. So what can we, as lawyers of the State Bar of Michigan, do at this time and place in our history? It seems to me, that we can and should lead a renaissance of interested and active citizenship by communicating the importance of involvement in the magical institution of self-government. Our knowledge, talent, and opportunity really mean we have a special responsibility to lead our fellow citizens. As lawyers we understand

the checks and balances of our three branches of government. We are trained and often talented in effective communication. While we may not be called at this place and time to make the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of our system of government, we share the same obligation as our predecessors to protect, foster, and nurture our democratic institutions of government suited to the times presented.

As lawyers, we understand and should appreciate the wonderment of self-government. We should extol, encourage, and inform our fellow citizens about the bedrock principles of our system of government—the rule of law allowing standards to supplement arbitrary and capricious behavior of a ruling class or a king. This rule of law is founded upon three bedrock principles: freedom, justice, and equality.

However, our system of government is not perfect. To work it needs the respect of all citizens, as well as their loyalty, confidence, and active participation.

We, as lawyers of the State Bar of Michigan, should take every opportunity to explain our system of government to our families, clients, and fellow citizens, to help them understand that citizenship is not a passive act, but one in which all must be actively engaged to guard against apathy. Although it seems these days everyone is busy with the tasks of everyday life, lawyers included, each of our activities offers the opportunity to talk with friends and neighbors about the importance of participation in government, starting with the simple step of voting. An informed and voting electorate is our best protection from tyranny. Consider inviting someone along the next time you participate in a PTO activity or attend a city council meeting to hear about or speak on some local issue of importance.

Perhaps there is no more important audience in this effort than our families. Certainly an important part of this responsibility is passing along the values of such active participation to our children. So consider involving your sister or nephew, or simply making sure that your mother gets her absentee ballot.

These seemingly small efforts have the very real potential for us to leverage our role as citizen-lawyers. It is another way in which we can fulfill our role to help preserve the bedrock principles of our nation: freedom, justice, and equality.

There is no other group of citizens in our state so well suited to take on this mantle of leadership. Hopefully, with our efforts, as men and women of the State Bar of Michigan, we can help our brother and sister citizens of this state, who are not lawyers, to appreciate and become re-energized to participate in our democratic system of government.

If we will accept this responsibility that lies in an area clearly within the knowledge and province of the lawyers of this state, we can lead this renaissance of interested, concerned, and active citizenry in this state—continuing the legacy of the people who have come before us—to enjoy the many fruits of the miracle of self-government for centuries to come.

The President's Upper Peninsula Trip

I left on Tuesday, October 10th, with Bruce Courtade, chair of the Representative Assembly; Lisa Allen-Kost, assistant executive director of Affinity Bars and Member Services; and Northern Michigan Consultant for District A, Local and Special Bars, Jim Erhart. Our journey took us to Sault Ste. Marie for a luncheon meeting with the 50th Circuit Bar and to Escanaba for dinner with the Menominee and Delta County Bar Associations. On Wednesday, we traveled for lunch to Iron Mountain with the Iron/Dickinson County Bar Association and to Ironwood to meet with the Gogebic/Ontonagon Bar Association. On Thursday morning, October 12th, we traveled to Houghton to meet with the Copper County Bar Association and we ended in Marquette to meet with the Marquette County Bar Association.

The reception we received from our brothers and sisters of the Bench and Bar of the Upper Peninsula was most gracious, warm, and congenial. For those of us of the Bar who have not had the occasion to travel in the Upper Peninsula, I highly recommend it. You will find the spectacular scenery only matched by the quality of the men and women who practice law

there. My warmest thanks to all who were so cordial to the four of us in our travels across the Upper Peninsula.

After I returned from the Upper Peninsula, I learned of the passing of a wonderful man of the law, Roy H. Christiansen of Huntington Woods. He was a municipal judge and an excellent defense lawyer. Roy was one of those unique people whom you meet in this profession. He reveled in being an attorney and, in Roy's case, as a municipal judge in Huntington Woods. Roy also sat as a recorder's court judge in Detroit; when he died, he was sitting as a visiting judge in Oakland County Circuit Court.

I last saw Roy in the Oakland County Circuit Court hallway about six weeks ago. I knew that he had been hurting and fighting cancer. Roy indicated to me that he was having some discomfort at times, but that he enjoyed using his mind as a lawyer and judge, coming to work to help people solve their problems, and was determined to carry on despite his illness. Roy epitomized the best qualities of a citizen-lawyer as he served this community, state, and profession and he will be sorely missed.

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