

Law Week 2007 Essay
"Liberty Under Law: Empowering Youth, Assuring Democracy"

Not very long ago, I watched as a young woman who attended my same beauty salon, and who brought her mail with her, disdainfully picked up one official-looking envelope from the pile and tossed it, promptly, into a disposal. At my confused glance, she easily responded, referring to the envelope: "This is, like, the third time I've gotten one of those. Jury summons. But I never go----it's a waste of time and I'd lose days from work."

In my law-impassioned mind, I urged to explain to her the fundamental importance of serving on a jury, tracing back to the American Revolution, even to John Locke's "state of nature" if I had to. And almost as if I could not help myself, that's exactly what I did. For quite some time.

I suppose that I will always be biased towards defending our Constitution and its governmental institutions. As the daughter of immigrants who each lived under Communist rule in their youth, it has always been stressed to me that becoming knowledgeable of, and participating actively within, one's national government is necessary in order to preserve the freedom guaranteed by the constitution. And it is that very constitutional framework, most remarkably, that provides for American citizens' freedom and liberty and that creates a cohesive, purposeful society.

Our state and national laws should not be viewed as stifling, a burden under which citizens are restricted from moving about freely, but instead as the very foundations from which we derive our treasured individual rights; to live under law is to live in liberty, but this should not be misinterpreted as to live above one's civic duty. It

has been impressed to me that only by fulfilling one's civic obligations can a citizen truly appreciate the freedoms those very obligations protect.

I can think of no greater way to impart this wisdom and confidence in our governmental system than through the civic education of American youth. My middle school's civics class did that exactly, informing students of their constitutional rights and the processes by which such rights, through our government, are preserved. As if the class in itself was not enough to kindle my early appreciation for law, listening to such guest speakers as former US Attorney General Janet Reno and the current Chief Justice of the Florida Supreme Court R. Fred Lewis certainly did it. To hear them speak so eloquently about a great love for the constitutional framework compelled me to love our democratic process as well. In fact, that seventh-grade civics course impacted me so, that I unhesitatingly decided to become a lawyer in the future, and even chose to transfer to my current high school because of its outstanding law program.

As consequence of that decision, I have had the incredible opportunity to take part in a number of co-curricular programs related to law, that have challenged me to think critically and encouraged me to assess the importance of youth in upholding democracy. From my participation as a member of the 2005 "We the People" state championship team, to my current involvement in mock trial, moot court competition with its appellate brief writing program and the law week contests, one essential fact has been made evident to me: the acquisition of law-related knowledge and active participation in civic education programs are our nation's greatest tools in combating the ever-increasing apathetic attitudes of our youth toward their role in the governmental process.

The problem does not simply lie in the fact that many young people are uneducated where it pertains to governmental function. You can have a student memorize the process by which a bill becomes law until they can recite it back to you, but that does not mean that they've learned the *significance* of bill-writing, that they understand and appreciate the *efforts* behind the actions and words. In order to comprehend the value of civic duty, students must approach the study of government with zeal, must relish in the historic guidelines from which we draw our individual liberties.

It is in my limited, but vigorous, experience that teenagers and children most drastically increase their enthusiasm for civic education with the realization that law affects nearly every component of their lives and that their role in the democratic process is an important one. As the President and Founder of my high school's chapter of the Junior State of America club, as well as through my internship with State Representative Anitere Flores, I have seen first-hand what encouragement and legal knowledge can do to sway previously disinterested attitudes.

There is an obligation within the community to provide such a spark, to ignite within youths a passion for civic duty born out of the knowledge that they can affect lasting change. The law is power, is freedom. I have complete faith that the empowerment of America's youth through civic education cannot help but sustain a democratic government and a society of active, well-informed individuals.