



PBA President
Gretchen A. Mundorff

With Liberty and Justice for All

I was 2 years old when my parents taught me to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. I had difficulty pronouncing my “J’s,” so the word justice always came out “ustice.” I know this because mom and dad decided to memorialize my “ustice speech” by recording it on our clunky Webcor tape recorder, which was “state of the art” in the 1950s. Some of you remember those dinosaurs of technology. They were the size of a large box fan.

Though I was too young to comprehend the meaning of the words in our Pledge of Allegiance, I knew that this was serious business because my parents said these words with the kind of reverent voice inflection that they reserved for only the most serious of matters. It occurs to me now that my parents thought it was important to begin to teach their toddler about the American system of justice and about the freedoms that we have as American citizens. In fact, they were beginning, in a very rudimentary way, my civics education and instilling in my young mind concepts about what it means to be a good citizen. So in August 2009 when I heard recently retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice David H. Souter begin his address to the House of Delegates of the American Bar Association by saying, “Civic education in the United States is not good enough and we have to do something about it,” he immediately got my attention. As I listened to his words, delivered in his unassuming and quiet New England demeanor, his passion for this issue became clear.

He told us how concerned he is “about the risk to our constitutional government when a substantial portion of the American populace simply fails to gain the understanding of how the government

works.” I was surprised to learn that about two-thirds of the people in the United States cannot even name the three branches of our national government. “This is something to worry about,” he said. And I agree. Justice Souter challenged the audience of lawyers and judges, asking us “to consider the danger to judicial independence when people have no conception of how the judiciary fits within the constitutional scheme.”

He recalled a famous conversation, shortly after the constitutional convention, when a woman asked Benjamin Franklin, “What kind of government do we have?” And Franklin replied, “A republic, if you can keep it.” Franklin, said Souter, “understood a republic can be lost. And one way it may be lost is by a kind of erosion in the minds of its people. It will be lost by citizens who lack the understanding or responsibility for preserving the constitutional government that they have. ... We have to revive the basic civic knowledge that once came naturally.”

Thanks in large part to the efforts of my parents stemming back to my early childhood, I have always had a passion for civics, law and government, and that passion was re-energized after listening to Justice Souter. It moved me to heed his call to action and make civics education a priority initiative during my year as PBA president.

I recently read George Washington’s argument to Congress advocating for civics education in his 1796 State of the Union address. Washington said, “A primary object ... should be the education of our youth in the science of government. In a republic, what species of knowledge can be equally important? And what duty more pressing ... than communicating it to those who are to be the

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future guardians of the liberties of the country?” Washington’s words are just as relevant today as they were when he spoke them 214 years ago.

Souter, Franklin, Washington and many others have told us that we have to communicate to the next generation the values, uniqueness and importance of our Constitution and the government it created. In her own practical, common-sense way, retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor has expressed it this way: “Knowledge of our Constitution and the role of our courts is not handed down in the gene pool. Each generation must learn about our system of government and the citizen’s role.”

Borrowing from yet another U.S. Supreme Court justice who has been equally passionate about the need for civics education in our schools, I share Justice Anthony M. Kennedy’s views urging that democracy and the principles of the Constitution have to be taught. He says, “It’s of vital importance that our young people know the meaning of the Constitution. You don’t take a DNA test to see if you believe in freedom. It’s taught. Teaching and learning are a conscious act. That’s how our heritage is handed down from one generation to the next.”

The PBA already participates in civics education with our “Celebrate the Constitution” program in the schools across Pennsylvania. This year we are launching a new PBA civics education initiative that we call “Project Citizen.” In our pilot program, chaired by past PBA presidents Ken Horoho and Andy Susko and under the capable direction of attorney Susan Etter, PBA education/special projects coordinator, we will be working with sixth-grade students in five public school districts across Pennsylvania. The students will attend a “Civics Academy,” where they will learn about

the value and importance of our Constitution and our government. They will learn about fundamental principles of authority, justice, responsibility and privacy. At the conclusion of their training, they will receive a “diploma” evidencing their completion of our academy program. Then, during PBA’s Law Day festivities in May, they will go back to their respective classrooms to teach their peers about the lessons they learned at the academy.

I urge you to take some time to reach out to your local school this year during the PBA “Celebrate the Constitution” programs, “Civics Academy” and “Project Citizen” and Law Day programs. I leave you with this moving thought from Justice Kennedy: “We must remember that it’s not just [public] officials [such as] the president who have the obligation to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution. It’s all of your obligations. But you cannot preserve what you do not revere. You cannot protect what you do not comprehend. You cannot defend what you do not know.”

“Civic education in the United States is not good enough and *we* have to do something about it.” To volunteer your help with our PBA civics education initiative, please contact me or Susan Etter. Help us to achieve our goal to bring civics education into every school across Pennsylvania. Together we can make sure every child in Pennsylvania learns something about our Constitution and government and knows something about the rights and responsibilities of being a citizen of the United States. ♦



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PBA President



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