political discourse in our country and in our state has deteriorated. Confidence in our government is at an all-time low. Polarization often prevents legislative compromise. Legislation often results from the actions of the party in power; rarely is it bipartisan.

Many media outlets capitalize on the polarization, focusing less on the day’s news and more on the resulting conflicts. The media recognizes that conflicts draw the attention of readers and viewers. Rarely, do we see “good news” reported. Just problems and conflict. Conflict and problems.

Our courts are not immune to this polarization. The reporting that surrounds significant court decisions is often prefaced by identifying the political affiliation of the judges and, in the case of federal judges, the political party of the president who appointed the judges. Citizens from the same political party view themselves as constituents of judges from their party. They naturally conclude that judges’ party affiliations are one explanation for their decisions.

Judges are unable to advocate for themselves. The most they can do is to write complete and thorough opinions each time they issue a decision. Unlike members of the legislative and executive branches, judges are ethically prohibited from walking up to a media outlet’s microphone to answer questions about their actions.

In such a landscape, where judges are elected like other members of government and where their decisions are often viewed as political, how can we best advocate for an independent judiciary and teach Pennsylvania citizens about the importance of judicial independence?

Let’s start with high school students. Let’s be sure they understand how our three branches of government work and why there are checks and balances.

Teen Screen is a unique program offered to Pennsylvania high schools by Film Pittsburgh, a nonprofit that seeks to advance the art of independent film and uses film as an educational tool. Film Pittsburgh’s Teen Screen program curates independent films from around the world that deal with issues of interest to today’s youth. Many of those issues are part of the regular high school curriculum. Teen Screen works with teachers to select a film from its extensive film library, provides teaching resources to complement the film, arranges to screen the film either in the classroom or at a movie theater and provides outside experts to discuss the themes presented by the film.

Recently, Teen Screen obtained the rights to screen a documentary about a federal lawsuit. Youth v. Gov is a documentary film that chronicles the case of Juliana v. United States, a lawsuit commenced in the U.S. District Court for the District of Oregon by a group of youth who claim that the actions of our federal government have contributed to climate change, depriving the plaintiffs of their constitutional right to a clean environment. The claims are novel and the procedural posture of the case as depicted in the film provide PBA lawyers/
our Pennsylvania high schools are aware of the opportunity and invite Teen Screen and the PBA into their classrooms. The program is free; it is generously supported by Film Pittsburgh and its many grants.

If you’re interested in this program for your local high school, arrange for the school to contact Teen Screen Director Lori Sisson at lsisson@filmpittsburgh.org to obtain the curriculum materials and schedule a screening date. Once Teen Screen is contacted by the school, it will in turn contact Susan Etter, PBA director of County Bar Services and Special Projects and staff liaison to the Law-Related Education Committee, who will arrange for PBA-member lawyers/judges to visit the classroom in conjunction with the screening of the film.

Helping our high school students better understand how our courts operate and advocating for our independent judiciary are core missions for the PBA. Be part of the solution; get your local high school involved in Teen Screen. ☺

Jay N. Silberblatt
PBA President

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