Removing Barriers, Building Genuine Participation

What do we talk about when we talk about diversity? It would be a mistake to think that we all mean the same thing or see things the same way when we enter the conversation about diversity. Our differing experience will show.

Some years ago I struck up a conversation with the fellow sitting next to me during a several-day CLE at George Washington University Law School. We talked practice areas and family over lunch breaks. The usual stuff. On the last day of the session he told me that overnight he had become a grandfather for the first time, a little girl named Mary Elizabeth. Notwithstanding the happiness and pride, he nevertheless asked, “What kind of name is that? What’s wrong with a nice Jewish name like Sarah or Rachel?” I responded, “Where I come from those are good Amish names.” We laughed and acknowledged that we know what we know.

It would be a mistake in this diversity conversation to think that language will serve us fully in stating what we are about. Words will fail us. But we will use words because they are the only tools we have at hand; we will state our purpose; we will amend our bylaws as necessary; and we will organize our association around this commitment to inclusion of diverse groups of lawyers within the profession. It will be the actions implementing these words that count.

I don’t intend to express any pessimism, but I do intend my message to be cautionary. Plans have a habit of getting put on a shelf and honored with hollow words and actions that ultimately amount to little more than empty gestures. It may be hard work to implement these decisions. But the concept of inclusion isn’t a hard one to grasp.

This is about growing the association. And that is not only a game of numbers. It is about including all lawyers from across our commonwealth in the work of the organized bar. This requires an ownership in the organization of the Pennsylvania Bar Association that goes beyond mere membership. It requires the building of a community in which our members believe and feel a genuine participation.

In a different time and in a different context, author and activist Dorothy Day wrote, “The legal battle against segregation is won, but the community battle goes on.” The message remains true in our nation and is true in our association.

There are no organizational impediments to membership and participation in the PBA. But there are barriers that some of us don’t see and won’t see until someone points them out to us. Some don’t feel welcome. Some are more comfortable in other organizations or in no professional organization at all. Some see little or no value in our services. Each one of these beliefs is a barrier to membership and participation. These barriers can be removed through a commitment to recognizing their existence and a commitment to casting them aside.

When the Pennsylvania Supreme Court designated the PBA as the professional organization most representative of lawyers in Pennsylvania, it meant that the PBA has the broadest and deepest membership of legal professionals in our commonwealth. We must be constantly attentive to maintaining the truth of that designation.

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