

An Anchor in the Storm

YLS Lawyers in the Classroom Project

By CINDY M. CIESLAK

One question I continue to ask myself this year is: what does it mean to be an organization? A recent leadership training I attended suggested that organizations are merely groups of people striving to serve the needs of its members. Members join organizations to help themselves as an individual, but they also join to be part of a community and a vision larger than themselves.

But when we are stressed or anxious, we tend to focus on the former, forgetting the latter. The pandemic brought stress and anxiety into most of our lives. Many of us have lost loved ones and struggled with that grief while forced to navigate a new virtual world: from court proceedings for our clients, to holidays with our families, to school for our kids. In such times, forging deeper human connections within our community and aspiring to a vision larger than ourselves can feel like luxuries for which we have neither the time nor emotional bandwidth.

In spite of this, I have found that the moment I am most tempted to cut myself loose from that deeper connection is when I most need it. Amidst all this disruption, finding ways to give back to our communities and to remain a part of that larger vision is an anchor in the storm. Both as individuals, and as organizations, we thrive when we lean into our values.

Paradoxically, despite and because of the stress, suffering, and hardship, the past several months of serving as chair of the Young Lawyers Section have been one of the most rewarding periods of my

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life. Presented with a global pandemic and the temptation to hunker down and wait for it to pass, the Young Lawyers Section instead chose to partner with the community to make progress on issues that matter. This past fall, we engaged in a voter registration drive and get-out-the-vote campaign via our social media channels. After the November election, we partnered with Foodshare for the YLS's annual Horn of Plenty Food Drive to help make the difference between hungry and healthy during the holiday season, raising a substantial amount of monetary donations (since in-kind was not an option this year) to help feed those in need. In December, we held a holiday networking event with two charitable components with donations to both the Connecticut Food Bank and Connecticut Children's Medical Center.

Our work to serve our communities is not over. I also decided to revive the "Lawyers in the Classroom" program—in which young attorneys partner with Connecticut elementary schools to lead students through an interactive civics workshop—with two major updates.

First, attorneys now attend classrooms virtually, not in-person. COVID-19 made that a necessity. The second update was inspired by the Judicial Branch calling on attorneys to raise the bar when it comes to racial and social justice in our communities.

By way of background, this past summer we witnessed the unjust killings of George Floyd and other persons of color and a wave of civil rights protests rising up against a society that has disenfranchised and oppressed non-white individuals. In that moment, the judicial branches of many states stayed silent. Ours spoke out. Chief Justice Richard A. Robinson of the Connecticut Supreme Court issued a statement in June and, together with Associate Justice Maria A. Kahn, hosted "A Virtual Conversation on Racial Justice" in July, calling on the bar to have the kind of honest talks about race that, in this country, are uncomfortable. The chief justice noted that many in his position had chosen silence. But he asked himself what message that would send. In the end, he concluded that the Judicial Branch was about some-

thing bigger than his personal comfort—equal justice for all.

The Chief Justice's choice was not inevitable. Equal justice for all is a big goal. And faced with goals larger than themselves, people often despair that any small action they take will not matter. I am reminded of the story of an old man who walked along a beach littered with starfish at low tide and came upon a small girl hurling one after another into the sea. Puzzled, he asked what she was doing. The youth replied, "When the sun gets high, they will die, unless I throw them back into the water." The old man chuckled, "But there must be tens of thousands of starfish on this beach. I'm afraid you can't make much of a difference." The girl bent down, picked up a starfish, and threw it as far as she could into the ocean. Then she turned, smiled, and said, "It made a difference to that one!"

The summer's events and the Justices' comments inspired the Young Lawyers Section to take a second look at one small action we were taking—the Lawyers in the Classroom program—and ask how it could make a difference. This program could initiate and invite conversations about civics and racial justice from a young age. After much discussion, YLS Civics Education Co-Directors Leland Moore and Scott Garosshen updated it with three goals in mind: (1) inspire students to learn about, engage with, and lead their community at the local, state, and national levels; (2) teach through an antiracist lens; and (3) partner with students to understand and appreciate justice, the rule of law, and democratic institutions.

To achieve these goals, they worked with three teacher consultants and many more partners within the bar to develop the program's first lesson: "Rules, Fairness, Democracy, & You." The lesson is divided into three segments. Section One begins by comparing and contrasting rules and fairness, then has students explore those concepts, working together



er to come up with rules to live together on a deserted island. Section Two asks how individuals can change unfair rules and walks students through the ways our government listens to people, from voting to courts to protest. Section Three concludes with examples of young people who have changed the rules and the world, from Ruby Bridges, to Greta Thunberg, to the students in two court cases, *New Jersey v. T.L.O.*, 469 U.S. 325 (1985) and *Tinker v. Des Moines*, 393 U.S. 503 (1969). Time is provided at the end for students to engage in a question-and-answer segment with our volunteer attorneys.

At its best, the program is a candid conversation with the students. When Attorney Paige Vaillancourt and I presented at a fourth grade classroom in November, the students asked us if we liked being attorneys and whether being an attorney was hard. We explained that although the job of an attorney is often challenging, it is also rewarding, as the heart of our job is helping people resolve their differences and work together. I found that, by the end of the program, talking about rules and fairness with the students had reset the cynical attitude I occasionally have

about the law and legal profession. And I think it lit the spark of civic engagement in a few young hearts—they were eager to learn and ultimately inspired to convince their teacher to change a classroom rule.

The Lawyers in the Classroom Program benefits not only our members, but also our organization and communities at large. For many organizations and communities, including the Connecticut Bar Association, the best investment is in our people. Creating future leaders is just as important as strengthening our current leaders, and having early conversations about rules, fairness, and leadership in a representative democracy is critical.

If you are reading this column and want to join us in our small step toward a vision of a more inclusive and engaged community, please consider volunteering with the Lawyers in the Classroom program. If you know any teachers, administrators, or school staff, help us spread the word to them. You (and they) can find out more at: ctbar.org/lawyers-in-the-classroom. These are tumultuous times. But sometimes tumult reminds us of who we are. ■