



## Lawyers Should Practice Civility; Society Needs the Example

OVER THE PAST SEVERAL MONTHS, we have seen glaring examples of the need for greater civility in our society.

Intemperate remarks at town hall meetings across the country during the health care reform debates, a congressman lashing out during a presidential address, and shocking behavior by well-known and well-liked athletes on the tennis court are examples of the explosion of incivility around us.

We have an important responsibility to express our opinions in a manner that respects the views of others. Lawyers have a particular role to help maintain a sense of balance and civility in our society.

The collegiality that develops among attorneys who are active in bar associations fosters civility in the legal system and society in general.

Senior lawyers have a special responsibility and opportunity to promote civility in the court system and society. We need only to look at a core component of the mission of the Senior Lawyers Conference: “to encourage cordial discourse and interaction among the members of the Virginia State Bar.”

Zealous representation of our clients and civility in our law practices are not mutually exclusive. To the contrary, there are many situations where “winning at all costs” is actually short-sighted. For example, in the family law setting with which I am most familiar,

it may be counterproductive for one spouse to try to portray the other spouse in the most negative terms possible when these estranged spouses will need to try to work together and coparent their children for many years. I have seen situations where parties have tunnel vision and seek certain short-term custody or financial goals while losing sight of how their actions or the actions of their attorneys may negatively affect the attitude of the other spouse permanently. As attorneys, we must help our clients consider the long-term effects in the midst of seeking short-term victories.

I enjoy working on bar association projects with attorneys who practice in areas of law I usually don't come in contact with. Projects may include mentoring an elementary school student with behavioral problem, helping a middle school student learn about the legal system as part of a docent program at the courthouse,

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or answering basic legal questions as part of a no-bills program in the community. A bond is developed as we share common goals in resolving disputes through the legal system. Bar associations also afford us an opportunity to interact with judges socially

and in workshops and panel discussions such as at bench-bar conferences. Through these events, we have a dialogue about ways attorneys and judges can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the court system.

Senior lawyers in particular must continue to foster a culture that supports active involvement in bar associations.

Attorneys also can regularly use our skills and training to promote civility beyond the courthouse. We might find opportunities coaching young people on the soccer field or in a board meeting of a homeowners association.

In this season when we exchange special greetings of joy, peace, and goodwill, emphasizing civility is especially appropriate. Moreover, I hope each of us will make civility a goal that is not just seasonal. It should be an integral part of our daily practice with our legal colleagues and others in society.