



MY OPINION

BY BOB BLACK
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You Are the State Bar

ou are the State Bar. Most of us do not think of it that way. We regard the State Bar as an amorphous entity collecting dues and meting out disciplinary sanctions. In reality, the Bar consists of almost 90,000 lawyers like you and me. It is true that the Bar collects fees and is directly responsible for the disciplinary system that protects the public and us. The State Bar is so much more, however.

In the year ahead, my goal is to focus on the basics: *service* and *education*. The two go hand in hand, but have an internal and external component. We want to provide the best service we can to you and we want to make sure you know about the many services available from the State Bar. This is the internal part of our basic mission. The external facet is to foster public awareness of the service of lawyers — just like you and me — to the profession and to our communities. We must also educate the public on the central role that lawyers play in our democratic society.

Most of us recognize the need to improve the reputation of our profession, regardless of whether we agree on the reasons why the public holds us in low regard. The hard part is to regain the public trust and to improve the public's perception of lawyers and the legal profession. How to accomplish this is the question. My chief presidential initiative this year will be to educate the public on the role of the judicial system and of the legal profession.

I am starting with students, most of whom are eager to learn and have yet to form fixed views of our profession. To engage students, we have to teach civics in an entertaining, interesting, and thought-provoking manner.

In April, I had the privilege of meeting with former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor to discuss civics education. Since leaving the bench, Justice O'Connor has focused her efforts on promoting iCivics, an innovative webeducation program. During remarks to a diverse and enthusiastic group of teachers at the Texas Law Center in Austin, Justice O'Connor remarked on the disappointing results of surveys of students' knowledge of our government and the limited time alloted to civics education in our schools. More important, she spoke passionately about the opportunities to connect with middle school and high school students through engaging, informative games and programs.

I am excited to be working this year with the State Bar's Law-Related Education department on an interactive project to assist Texas students and teachers as they prepare for the new Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) standards. The new standards, the first in 13 years, will take effect on August 1, 2011. "Oyez, Oyez, Oh Yay!" will focus on landmark court decisions students must be familiar with to be successful. The finished product, which we will launch during the Bar Leaders Conference this July in Houston, will include a website with links to case summaries, videos, and curriculum materials for teachers. I am grateful that Justice O'Connor and Texas Supreme Court Chief Justice Wallace Jefferson have recorded video introductions.

Civics education is critical to fostering engaged citizens who understand our democracy and the liberties it protects. Technology allows us to engage students in new and innovative ways — and they absorb an amazing amount.

Of course, civics education does not end with students. We are preparing vignettes on the lives and careers of some of our great and colorful Texas lawyers. These will be used as the basis of an adaptable PowerPoint presentation that can be shown anywhere in the state to community or civic groups. It is going to take time to open and change minds, but it is a challenge we must undertake and a path along which we must persevere.

My second presidential initiative is related. The legal profession in Texas has a rich history, a past that is not only relevant to the present but also compelling and entertaining. The past can be revivified through documents and papers. There are historic legal documents throughout the state, some of which are preserved, many of which are not. We plan to collaborate with both the Texas Bar Historical Foundation and the Texas Supreme Court Task Force on Historic Document Preservation to bring many of these important documents back to life — and to tell their stories. It is my firm belief that telling these stories will educate the public about the central role of our beloved profession and improve the public's regard for us.

I am proud to be a lawyer and I hope you are as well. I cannot imagine an honor greater than the opportunity to serve you in the year ahead.

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