

An Inspirational Journey Through Washington, D.C.

By Jon Montgomery

Last year I attended the Annual Meeting of the National Association of Legal Assistants, Inc. ("NALA") in Washington, D.C. and along with a few friends had a very special experience that made me stop and think about the special responsibilities of those who work in the legal field. I would like to share the experience with you and some of my thoughts about citizenship.

A friend once told me that most people have only two parts to their lives: family and work, but that there ought to be three parts to everyone's life: family, work and community. I would like to address our responsibilities as free people in each of these arenas, but first my experience in Washington that was the start of all these thoughts.

The NALA meeting was planned so that those attending could enjoy the 4th of July in the Nation's Capitol after the meetings were over. I spent the morning of the 4th with a friend, walking through the holocaust museum, Even though I have read a number of books regarding World War II and the holocaust, I was unprepared for the museum's presentation of this dark and horrible period in the history of mankind. It simply shook me to the core. The National Holocaust Museum is a must see for anyone traveling to Washington as it

takes you back in time and gives a new understanding of the time and events and a lack of understanding of how people could act so inhuman. It is a story that we must never forget. We spent the afternoon reading the inspiring inscriptions of the Jefferson and Roosevelt Memorials and hearing the reading of the Declaration of Independence.

It was with the horrors of the holocaust in the back of my mind that I set off that evening with several friends, first to the Capitol and then to see the war memorials. As we looked at the Vietnam Memorial and sunk deeper and deeper into the list of the names of those lost in that conflict, I realized how easy it is to just accept your government's version of events and how, with the passage of time, truth can be revealed.

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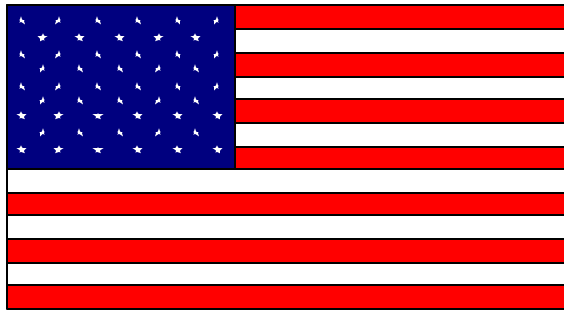
My thoughts jumped back to Germany in WWII and then to my local college district and a college trustee who was proposing a class questioning the reality of the holocaust. How sad it is to use the freedom that so many fought and died for to bend young minds toward hate.

We went on to view the Korean Memorial. A message curved into the memorial spoke of the thousands and thousands who have died for freedom. Faces on the granite face of the memorial looked out on to a field of statues of

men in arms, and in the stillness of the moment, I was thinking of the hopes and aspirations of those thousands who died for our ideals of freedom, justice, and equality. I was thinking about the people in America today who do not have the benefit of those ideals. I was thinking about the special responsibility we all share as paralegals, to honor the memory of our fallen countrymen by upholding justice in all we do. In the Final analysis it's what our jobs are all about: ensuring justice is served by helping others exercise their freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution. I was thinking about how to uphold the ideals of our country in the three areas of our lives: work, community and family.

In the work arena, we must hold ourselves to the highest ethical standards and care about the client's problems. We are an important part of the team charged with ensuring that clients are treated fairly under the Law and enjoy the benefits of freedom so many died to protect. We truly dishonor the memory of our fallen countrymen by not always doing our best to see the client's rights protected.

In the community arena, it seems that some have come to think of patriotism as corny, Flag Day, for example, seems to pass each year with little note and Memorial Day and the Fourth of July, for many, might as well be called "BBQ Day" because very little thought is given to the ideals on which our Nation is said to be founded. The flag is the eternal symbol of those ideals and no acts of man can change what it stands for. If we act against its principles, we abandon it as a national symbol. What should we do to be better citizens? We can start in the political arena by never, never missing an opportunity to honor those who died for our ideals of freedom and justice by VOTING. I am astonished at the number of people who make voting decisions based on television advertising when we are so



fortunate to have a ballot pamphlet with analysis of the pros and cons of the various propositions. As members of the legal community, we certainly should be educated voters and base our decisions on what is good for all - not just for ourselves or what is expedient. We should abandon the politicians who just see how the wind is blowing and then rush in to lead the mob, those who have no principles, and those who look for scapegoats instead of solutions. We should support those who have the courage of their convictions who say what they stand for, for better or worse, but are not afraid to change their

views when they are proven wrong. We tend to think of freedom in abstract terms but we must remember that we are tied to those who died

for our freedom. Our focus as free people should not be that freedom is "I can do whatever I want when I want," but that we are free to make a more perfect world, and unlike those who died in concentration camps and gulags, we do not need to fear reprisals for our efforts to help all people. To honor our war heroes on Memorial Day with an occasional thought or a flower on a grave is to pay mere lip service to what they died for. We need to live to honor their memory every day. We must work in our communities, not just by putting a few coins in the Salvation Army bucket at Christmas, but by being involved in a personal way, such as helping someone to learn to read, being an advocate for a child, serving a meal to the less fortunate. In short, look poverty and desperation straight in the eye and do something about it. You will be a better person for it. If you don't know where to start, call the United Way

in your local area as they are well acquainted with your community's needs. We can't look to political leaders to solve all the nation's problems. Problem solving and national greatness starts with each of us in our daily lives. We must strive to uphold the great ideals of our nation by embracing diversity. We are a diverse nation and in respecting each other we find strength.

Many have said that we must eradicate bigotry, racism, inequality, injustice and ignorance. You say grand ideas but we can do these things in small ways each day ourselves - we can start with educating our children. What we teach our children is a lasting legacy, a gift to the future. If our children see us working in our community to help others, voting on election day, striving to do our best, and upholding high ethical standards even when the result cuts against us personally, they will follow our lead and grow into lives of good character and good citizenship. You may say that as individuals we are powerless, but I say, working together we can carry the lighted lamp of truth into the dark and can dispel the ignorance and injustice that dwells therein. Working in our communities, being educated voters, teaching our children to be ethical and fair, not repeating mistakes of the past, and doing our best on the job; that's good citizenship and it can change our world for the better. Also remember, we must care about our profession. It's all about justice. It's what tens of thousands have died for.