Igniting a Culture of Civility

by Paula Lustbader

How does a loving brother pay homage to his only sibling? “With Robert goes one of the last pure, kind, and generous persons I know,” my father said. These brothers were raised to have integrity, to care and respect others, to make a positive contribution to their community, and to be of service — basically, to abide by the Golden Rule and treat others as they would like to be treated. In his very humble manner, Robert upheld these values as he walked in this world. He was a caring brother, husband, father, grand father, uncle, colleague, friend; he generously gave to numerous charities that promoted humane treatment of animals, supported the poor, and helped the young; he tutored refugees; and he worked for peace. Three months before he passed away, he folded his extra-large body into his compact car and drove from Florida to New Orleans to participate in a veterans’ demonstration.

To honor his brother, my father, Alfred Lustbader, established Robert’s Fund, a small Seattle-based foundation devoted to fostering more civility in our lives. “Civility” suggests different things to different people. At Robert’s Fund we think of civility not only as a display of good manners, but also as behavior that reflects respect and courtesy to others. Sadly, the lack of civility is rampant in our current high-stress, fast-paced, materialistic, and instant-gratification culture. We are losing our sense of humanity, decency, and consideration for others. Our world is becoming smaller through technology. Our planet is becoming more fragile. The need for civil behavior is more significant than ever.

As one of a variety of initiatives, Robert’s Fund is launching The Civility Promise: Fostering Care and Respect in the Legal Profession. This is a coordinated program to enhance civility in the practice of law. Robert’s Fund has joined with Bar News to publish a series of monthly columns to be written by some of the finest in our profession. In addition, in collaboration with other attorneys and with Seattle University School of Law, Robert’s Fund is developing curriculum for law schools and a series of CLE programs addressing civility within the profession. This year we will offer a three-part CLE series at Seattle University School of Law: On February 4, we will present “Igniting a Culture of Civility: Defining and Understanding Civility in the Legal Profession”; on March 4, we will present “Civility Matters: The Benefits to the Parties, the Practitioner, and the Profession”; and on April 1, we will present “Civility Speaks: The Behaviors that Embody Care and Respect.” In addition, we will conduct an eight-day seminar in Sovana, Italy, in October.

Why should we focus on lawyers? As a law professor, I am saddened when I hear about the growing disillusionment with the legal profession. However, I am gratified when I hear about former students making a positive difference. Lawyers exert a powerful influence within society. They play a significant and powerful role in governing this country. They shape our values and laws as judges and as politicians. Throughout our history, 59 percent of U.S. presidents were lawyers. Currently, 59 percent of U.S. senators, 40 percent of U.S. representatives, and 24 percent of state governors are lawyers. Lawyers also serve vital roles in private industry. Even when they are not in leadership positions, they are often the ones who negotiate and set policy for these organizations. Lawyers also work with individual clients to either prevent conflict in transactional practices or to resolve conflict in litigation. Finally, they serve as leaders in our respective communities in their capacity as lawyers or as members of a group. Like it or not, as lawyers we are role models for many people.

The promise of civility is greater personal satisfaction in our lives and careers. Civility is good for our health, our profession, and our clients. When we are civil, we can help de-escalate conflict and reduce rudeness. Civility is more than politeness and affability. Civility is courage with kindness. Civility can increase client loyalty and client base. Civility leads to more successful outcomes. Civility is a code of behavior that we can restore in our everyday lives and in the practice of our profession.

Nothing or no one can ever replace my beloved uncle. However, through the work of Robert’s Fund, our hope is to further his legacy by encouraging everyone to think about the impact their behavior has on others.