

President's Message



Are You Civic Minded?

By Jill Weiss

Lawyers are an educated bunch. We are well taught, well studied, and well spoken. We know the three branches of government, we can name a sitting Supreme Court Justice and we know our courts are underfunded.

But what if you are not a lawyer, what would you know about civics, about the U.S. court system? Would you be one of the only 21% of Americans that could name the three branches of government? Or would you still be one of one-third of the American public that knows the name of even one of the nine Supreme Court Justices? Or would you agree with the 41% of Americans who blame delays in justice on unnecessary lawsuits rather than inadequate funding of our courts?¹

During last year's election, The Florida Bar initiated the *Vote Is In Your Court*, a program designed to educate adults about merit retention and the election of judges in our state. What was learned from that initiative was that Floridians, similar to the rest of the country, are lacking in civics education. Simply put, "an informed public is the best defense of a vigorous democracy, the rule of law and an independent, impartial and fair judiciary."² And who better than attorneys to teach adults about civics.

To encourage attorneys to promote and speak about civics, The Florida Bar has launched *Benchmarks: Raising the Bar on Civics Education*. Benchmarks is designed to teach the fundamentals of government and civics to adults in an interactive and entertaining manner. The program provides subjects with corresponding activities including PowerPoints and handouts that attorneys can use when addressing

community groups. There are a variety of topics, including: *Amending Florida's Constitution: The Role of the Courts*, which addresses amending the Florida Constitution and the role of the court in doing so; *Judging for Yourself*, where participants learn about the role of appellate judges and merit retention; *Could You Pass the Test?* an interactive activity addressing citizenship and the Constitutions of the United States and Florida; *Is it Unconstitutional? The Case of the Scarlet Tag*, where participants review the Bill of Rights and analyze whether a hypothetical law is unconstitutional; *What the Law Means*, an activity which addresses the role of judges and how the judicial branch differs from the other branches of government; and *Beyond Labels*, a program teaching the importance of judicial independence. The activities are fun as well as educational. I had the opportunity to answer some of the questions on the U.S. citizenship exam as part of the *Could You Pass the Test* program. My group had a ringer in the form of a 13 year old that was quite helpful as he had just studied government in school.

The Palm Beach County Bar Association endorses and supports this important effort. Our Law Related Education Committee, chaired by Liz Herman, is taking this program to churches, temples, rotary clubs, Kiwanis and other community groups throughout Palm Beach County. In the coming months, attorney volunteers will speak to adults about our government, our courts, and the importance of judicial independence. If you know of a group that may want a speaker, or you are willing to volunteer yourself, I encourage you to contact the Bar. As Justice Kennedy said when addressing the opening assembly of the ABA this summer, we "must insist that civics education be recommenced and revitalized because freedom is not something that's on automatic pilot."

¹ <http://ourcourts.org>

² <http://www.floridabar.org/tfb/TFBLegNW.nsf>