

Our Obligation as Leaders

Beyond the Practice of Law

By Richard D. Tucker, DRI Membership Committee Chair



While sitting in the ballroom at the 2017 DRI Annual Meeting, listening to Attorney General Eric Holder, I was struck by his closing comments. Reminding us that we are all lawyers, he turned toward the audience and challenged us with this question: “What are you doing to make this country better?” He then paused, and repeated the same probing question to us before leaving the stage.

What he asked (and the way he asked it) really got me thinking. I had recently read DRI Immediate Past President Laura Proctor’s September column in this very same space. She reminded us of the prominent roles that lawyers have played in our society throughout history, and how we have to change the narrative about what it means to be a lawyer: that it is a higher calling, and that we are gatekeepers of the rule of law. And then I considered that Attorney General Holder took it one step further: that because we are privileged to work in this honorable profession, and because we have the ability to make a difference, we owe it to our profession, to our families and our communities, and to ourselves to be more than good lawyers. We must be good citizens and contribute to our society beyond the bounds of the practice of law.

Yes, we can make this country better by always striving for justice in the courtroom, by maintaining the highest ethical standards in our practice, and by always being respectful to the judiciary, court personnel, and our clients and opponents alike. But, are we too focused on what’s going on “between the lines” and neglecting our obligations to the public at large? Are billable hours, virtual offices, the next jury trial, and business development too often at the forefront of our daily lives? Changes in technology, the demands of family and the “work–life balance” concept all eat away at the 24 hours we have available each day. And yes, an overwhelming majority of lawyers meet or exceed their pro bono representation obligations. Yet, is there more that we need to be doing—in fact should be doing—“outside the lines” of family and our practices to contribute to our country and our communities?

The answer, I would argue, is a resounding “yes!” It’s no secret that our country faces huge challenges. One only has to look at the newspaper or open his or her web browser to read about political strife, threats to our nation’s secu-

urity, racial divide, and poverty among the many issues that confront us. Yes, most of us are so busy in our practices and with our families that we often sit idly by and do nothing more than complain about what’s wrong. Or we write a check to make us feel like we are doing something. But we don’t get out there and actually do anything concrete to make it better. Some would argue that the prob-

lems are too big, too daunting, for one person (or even a few) to make a difference. That seems to me to be a hollow and demonstrably wrong assertion. One of my most rewarding moments as a member of DRI was the opportunity to participate in the volunteer effort of the Employment and Labor Law Committee at a Nashville food pantry the day before the committee’s an-

nual seminar this past May. We sorted and packed thousands of pounds of donated food for delivery to local food cupboards and families in need in the greater Nashville area. It was fun and fulfilling—each individual participating and contributing to the greater good. That is just one example of how we can make a difference outside of the courtroom, the boardroom, or the office.

Whether you walk to raise money for cancer research, volunteer at a learn-to-read program at your local library, sit on your local community planning board, or even run for public office, you are answering the question posed by Attorney General Holder. We all need to challenge ourselves and take inventory of what we are doing outside of the practice of law to make this country better. We can all do more and need to do more. We are looked upon as leaders, and our leadership should extend outside the boundaries of our daily work lives. We are privileged to work in our chosen field, and in large part because of that, we have the resources and ability to make a difference.

Never in a million years did I think I would be asked to contribute to this column, much less serve on the DRI Board of Directors and now serve as the chair of the DRI Membership Committee. I am humbled and honored to hold those positions, and I look forward to serving DRI and its membership in the coming months. A wise past president of DRI once reminded me to “sprint to the finish line.” And I hope to be able to do more and meet Mr. Holder’s challenge in the years to come before crossing that line.

We all need to challenge ourselves and take inventory of what we are doing outside of the practice of law to make this country better.