

Willamette Valley American Inn of Court, October 15, 2020

Breaking Down Barriers – Practicing civility in difficult times.

Introduction: Team Lead, Audrey Hirsch

During this unique time in October, 2020, my team decided to take what we hope is a unique and thought-provoking approach at a Willamette Valley American meeting, to have a discussion, with you and each other about the topic of Civility. I want to thank my team for being willing to help on short notice and for our promised future gatherings. I especially want to give a shout out to and thank Tiffany Hamilton and Kathryn Jackson for helping put tonight's program and resource materials together, both on extremely short notice.

Our Inn has been virtual since March, and most of us have been attending almost everything from court hearings to CLEs, and even gatherings with friends and relatives either remotely or from a "safe distance". We have new daily vocabulary words including Coronavirus pandemic, Covid-19, and social distancing. We meet in zoom rooms and in addition to checking to make sure we have our keys, also check for a mask whenever we leave home. When the occasion calls for hugs, if we're lucky enough to be in-person, we do elbow bumps and waves instead. Of course, our children's education is challenged and many of us balance working full time from home with entertaining, engaging, and teaching young children. I've had more conversations about toilet paper in 2020 than I ever have. You get the idea because the virus affects all of us every day.

In the Spring, protests and marches for Black Lives Matter took center stage across the country, sparked by the deaths of George Floyd and other Black American citizens at the hands of police officers and leading to renewed conversations about systemic racism and the need for change.

Our country is less than 20 days away from an election where partisan divides are inescapable. Many of us would like to "agree to disagree" and do so respectfully. Are we in the minority? Or do many people agree, but stay silent?

And, on top of those global and United States events, here in Oregon, we spent 2 weeks of September evacuating homes or making plans to do so, as we faced wildfires in several locations, some quite nearby. We stayed indoors because of the smoke from those fires and we breathed a collective sigh of relief when September rains finally came and the fires were brought under control. Still, this is a devastating event for many, including loss of homes, and in some cases, loss of life.

In the midst of all that is happening around us, we decided to have an evening focused on smaller group discussions as follows:

Getting acquainted with one another as a substitute for our introductory social time at Inns where we traditionally greet one another and enjoy visiting over a glass of wine or some popcorn.

Next, breaking into smaller groups to discuss barriers to communication and civility in the context of the 2020 ones I mentioned: working from home and social distancing, politics, emergency interruptions of life like the wildfires – or other barriers like different areas of legal practice, older and

younger lawyers having different ways of doing things, or how to navigate diversity and inclusion issues. Not to engage in disagreements, but to figure out what leads to misunderstandings and less than civil communication.

On the topic of generations, I do want to point out a free OSB program referenced in the program resources called: Hey Boomer and Avocado Toast. This was one of our ideas for a presentation, but it didn't work for tonight. Essentially, it is bar leaders having a dramatized discussion about lawyers who are boomers, gen x, or millennials and how we can learn from each other. I do recommend watching it, especially if you need CLE credit.

Finally, we want to go back into small groups and discuss ideas for overcoming the barriers. How do we get to know someone we seemingly have nothing in common with? How do we seek understanding when we become acquainted as adversaries in the courtroom? What do we need to do and learn to move past the conflict? What are examples you've experienced of Civil Communication that overcomes barriers?

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