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Published Friday, December 29, 2006

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Cutting Freedom In Half

When R. Fred Lewis became a justice of the Florida Supreme Court eight years ago this month, he set a goal for himself. He would visit three to four schools a month so students could connect a face with a faceless branch of government.

Now the court's chief justice, Lewis continues his visits to schools, civic clubs and organizations around the state, spreading the word about what the legal system does and the rights it protects.

He gives talks to other judges and lawyers as well. But no matter the audience, he asks an engaging question: What if Americans were forced to give up half the freedoms guaranteed to them by the U.S. Constitution?

It's a question that always evokes discussion, and usually the same answer from students: Freedom of speech and freedom of religion make the retention list. They are willing to give up the freedom of assembly.

Speaking to a group of lawyers at the Hillsborough County Courthouse last week, Lewis said he then tells students why the freedom of assembly is so important: "That's fine. But you'll have to talk to yourself in a corner. ... You'll have to pray in a corner."

Lewis is recruiting other judges around the state to help him in his effort to stress the importance of the Constitution. His colleagues are getting the message. "It seems like what we used to call civics is being downplayed," Hillsborough Circuit Judge Ralph Stoddard told The Tampa Tribune. "It's a good idea to work with the schools and see what we can offer."

About 2,000 volunteers have signed up to help Lewis. (As an aside, Lewis has a Polk County connection: He received his undergraduate degree from Florida Southern College in Lakeland, where he played basketball and was selected as one of the top 15 scholar-athletes of the year by the NCAA in 1969.) "We're marching all over the state to spread the word," Lewis told the newspaper. "We believe firmly in the education of citizens and in providing information so [students] can make their own decisions. Our ultimate goal is the education of all Floridians."

Floridians - and all Americans - could use the knowledge. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services agency recently announced it was adding dozens of new questions to the nation's naturalization test. The changes are designed to place more emphasis on U.S. history and make immigrants aware of what it means to be an American.

New questions include: "Name one of the writers of the Federalist Papers", "What did the abolitionists try to end before the Civil War?" and "What are the three branches or parts of the government?"

Even many native-born Americans have vague answers to many questions. Take the last one, for example. When asked the three branches of government in a poll, 40 percent of the respondents couldn't identify them. Nearly one in five Floridians thought the branches were Republican, Democrat and Independent. (The answers to the other two questions are: James Madison, Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, and slavery.)

In January, The Florida Bar released the results of its civic-awareness poll. It found the state's citizens are in need of a refresher course. "We discovered that Floridians score an 'A' on recognizing the importance of the constitutional concepts; but get an 'F' on defining separation of powers, and checks and balances; and a 'D' on identifying the three government branches," said Alan B. Bookman, bar president.

Bookman said that the Florida Law-Related Education Association found that less than 10 percent of Florida's 67 counties require the teaching of civics in middle school. And while high school students are required to take a government course for one semester, it is put off until the senior year.

Bookman said that's "too little, too late, and added, "We'd like to see 100 percent of Florida middle schools providing a mandatory yearlong course in applied civics."

It's a goal The Florida Bar can lobby for during the upcoming legislative session. Meanwhile, Lewis and his colleagues can continue their talks to children, and their much-needed refresher course for adults.