

Florida Chief Justice Urges Civics Education

By THOMAS W. KRAUSE The Tampa Tribune

Published: Dec 25, 2006

TAMPA - Which constitutional rights are expendable?

R. Fred Lewis, the chief justice of the Florida Supreme Court, said he leads discussions at middle schools and high schools across Florida and presents students with a disturbing scenario.

What if the United States were invaded, and the new leadership believed Americans have too many rights?

If you were forced to keep only half the rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution, Lewis asks the students, would you give up freedom of the press? How about the right to a jury trial?

Last week, at the Hillsborough County courthouse, Lewis presented the same scenario to a roomful of judges and lawyers. He is spearheading an effort to recruit legal professionals to do what he has done for more than eight years: visit schools across the state to talk about the U.S. Constitution.

When the students choose their rights, Lewis told the lawyers, freedom of speech and freedom of religion almost always are listed as necessities. Invariably, however, the youngsters forego their right to peaceably assemble.

"That's fine," Lewis said he tells the students. "But you'll have to talk to yourself in a corner.… You'll have to pray in a corner."

Without the right to assemble, group meetings and churches could be outlawed, Lewis said.

The lesson plan, Lewis said, always encourages lively debate.

Sessions Popular

More than 90 Bay area lawyers met with Lewis in a morning session last week. That afternoon, 80 more lawyers came to hear about Lewis' successes in schools and to receive tips on how to present similar lessons.

Over the next several months, Lewis will meet with lawyers from Pensacola to Miami in an effort to recruit them to speak at schools. Lewis' goal: to have lawyers and judges volunteer to speak with classes at every school in Florida.

Hillsborough Circuit Judge Ralph Stoddard, who was among the lawyers who turned out at the courthouse, said he thought the ideas might be a bit sophisticated for younger students. Still, he said, they should resonate with high school students, especially if the speakers used scenarios involving teenagers' personal concerns.

For example, Stoddard said, 17 and 18 year olds would be fascinated by the laws governing who can inspect their lockers or who can search their cars.

"It seems like what we used to call civics is being downplayed," in school curriculums, Stoddard said. "It's a good idea to work with the schools and see what we can offer."

Annette Boyd Pitts, the executive director of the Florida Law Related Education Association, said Lewis began visiting schools with her organization shortly after he was appointed to the bench in 1998. Since then, she said, Lewis has spoken at about three schools per month.

"Chief Justice Lewis said he never met a judge until he was in law school," Pitts said. He wanted to remedy that for today's students.

The effort to recruit more judges and lawyers to join Lewis began in June, when he was appointed chief justice. With 70,000 or 80,000 lawyers in Florida, Pitts and Lewis hope they can drum up the support needed to penetrate every school in short order.

Statewide, about 2,000 volunteers have signed up.

"We're marching all over the state to spread the word," Lewis said. "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."

Lawyers and judges, he said, are not expected to walk into a school and take over a classroom. Nor are they expected to teach for an entire semester. Lewis hopes they will work hand-in-hand with teachers to provide the best possible information to students over one class period - or possibly over one week of classes.

Currently, the program is targeting middle schools and high schools - specifically social studies, government and law magnet classes.

Lewis said the first time he spoke to a class his confidence in his teaching abilities was lacking.

"There's no question I had some trepidation when I first entered the classroom," he said. "But there is just something special about walking away from a classroom and seeing the students and their interest. The lights just come on."

Lewis isn't the only lawyer trying to increase civics education in schools.

Many People Don't Know Basics

In January, the Florida Bar and the American Bar Association released a poll that showed disturbing trends in American's knowledge about our system of government. Since then, the groups have worked with media outlets to encourage greater emphasis on civics education in schools.

