

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 161, No. 25

Conversations that guide us to action

Jail is the intersection of racism and poverty. Have you ever heard that before? Have you ever read "Parting the Waters," the first of the three-part series "America in the King Years"?

Recent experiences compel me to share these quick reflections. The Pro Bono Clinic at my alma mater, The John Marshall Law School, hosted Bryan Stevenson, executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative in Atlanta, in collaboration with the Rev. Janette Wilson and the Rainbow PUSH Coalition.

In short: It was incredible.

Stevenson feels "persuaded" we can still convene the conversations with our local communities on the most difficult and pressing questions regarding shared challenges based in inequality, disenfranchisement and estrangement.

I am inspired by how he framed this question for his lecture: How do we treat our condemned? My first thought was to ponder how our state even defined the term "condemned."

But my prime interest in attending this lecture was to identify a possible "teaching moment" that I could incorporate into the legislative drafting class I teach at John Marshall.

In his remarks, Stevenson stated that 10,000 children in America are currently in adult jail or prison. Your gas may be cheaper and investments selling higher, but incarcerating juveniles continues to get more expensive.

Soon after the lecture I caught Stevenson in the "10 Questions" segment to close the Oct. 14 issue of Time magazine. In this column, Stevenson mentioned his new book, "Just Mercy," causing me to immediately ponder the adventures contained in that reflection.

And what about the difficult conversations required to develop better solutions for the disabled? Aren't we all advocates, each capable of making a measurable difference in the lives of our neighbors.

On this note, I am persuaded by the testimonials I witnessed during the memorial service for a hero of mine, Dr. Henry B. Betts of the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago. The tributes spoke of a lifetime of dedication to the cause of the disabled, even dating back to when he was but 6 years old, when his younger sister was afflicted with a condition.

My heart stirred when that same sister stood before us to speak of Betts' time while in Virginia during his formal medical training, in the 1950s, when he saw the gore of racial prejudice firsthand, to cause him to dedicate himself to those all who are "estranged."

Upon reflection, I now see these three luminaries as the conveners of the most important conversations of our lifetime. Their conversations offer us guidance for how we can take action.

Stevenson believes we must get closer to the problems, to the actual people impacted. We need

POINTS FROM THE PRACTICE

KEVIN M. HULL



Kevin M. Hull is the executive director of the Westside Institute for Science and Education, a nonprofit corporation that advances the health and wellness of veterans at the Jesse Brown VA Medical Center. He is an adjunct professor at The John Marshall Law School, teaching legislative drafting.

to challenge the current narrative to keep hope so we all are ready and prepared to do "uncomfortable things."

He asked the law students, professors and alumni in the audience when the last time we heard someone challenge us to "stand, speak, even if you are the only one doing it" to only remind us that "hope prevails where hopelessness persists." He stirred my desire to commit even more of myself to the causes I hold most dear.

But it was Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle who challenged me most recently to "do great things" and "bend the arc toward justice" during her remarks in the 2015 Martin Luther King Jr. Day address at the Union League Club of Chicago.

Her particular emphasis directed toward the tables full of kids from the Boys and Girls Clubs spoke to the teacher in me and my commitment to helping train the next generation of advocates.

The words I cherish most from Preckwinkle's address might be these: "Plant the trees that will shade our children and grandchildren."

From the hope espoused from the Vietnam-era veterans I encounter every day through my work at the local VA hospital, to the brightness of the future of the law students I mentor, I feel we all have the ability and capacity to continue the work of bending that arc toward justice.

Stevenson challenges that "the courage is in the convening." I felt a command to act moons ago, prior to law school. Now I search out opportunities to step into my "groove" and go make a difference.

For many of us, with all the challenges upon our time and selves, it might come down to a question of opportunity. Did you know rabbis from the Jewish faith were some of the most helpful bands of fellow clergy to King? I ponder the risk these neighbors took to convene the conversations King called for, no matter how uncomfortable.

For me, I commit myself every day to finding better solutions for our veterans and military families. But there's an additional conversation I now want to help convene: "Jail is the intersection of racism and poverty."

What's your conversation?