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Miami-Dade: Community ethics matter

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There is a direct correlation between the quality of civic engagement and the integrity of government.

In the month of August alone, three Miami-Dade mayors were arrested on various charges of corruption. Do we, the citizens, bear some blame for this?

We may bemoan the parade of corrupt officials on display in the recent and not-so-recent history of this county. We could condemn them, perhaps even feel relieved by their comeuppance. But we cannot escape the fact that we elected and re-elected them.

We all share a collective responsibility for the integrity of local government. We need some legal reforms, but virtue in public life cannot really be legislated. It can, however, be inculcated through education and practice. Aristotle suggested that ethical virtue can be achieved through habit. Somewhere along the way, we lost the habits of good citizenship.

On Oct. 22, more than 300 Miami-Dade judges, attorneys, civic and business leaders, public officials and just plain good citizens will present Ethical Governance Day in high schools across the county. This nonpartisan event will continue a dialogue that began last year between prominent civic members of society with the next generation of citizens and voters. It focuses on the importance of citizen involvement in order to keep government responsive and ethical.

The Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust, in partnership with Miami-Dade Public Schools, began this annual observance with an eye toward jumpstarting the most crucial component of ethical government — a public that is fully engaged in an active and discerning civic life.

Ethical Governance Day is a key piece of a much larger project that began with the establishment of the Ethics Commission nearly 17 years ago. That beginning continues today in our effort to build a stronger civil society in a county that has yet to develop the civic institutions and citizen involvement that mark a healthy political community.

The change must begin in our schools.

The various causes of decline in the habits of good citizenship across America include loss of family stability, fear of crime, the consumption of our spare time by TV, social media and assorted new toys and gadgetry, gated communities, urban sprawl — and this is just a partial list.

We also have unique challenges in South Florida: the absence of a common cultural identity, transience and a materialistic, often superficial culture that has evolved from our history, geography and lack of community cohesiveness.

We may be a rapidly changing nation, but our country has a rich soil for citizenship. We have defined to the world what it takes to create a lasting democracy. It is a legacy we must fulfill and continue. South Florida will be a bellwether for the changes that will determine whether we succeed in that effort.

Most of our forebears came to this country voluntarily, for what America, its democracy, and way of life offered. Other Americans whose ancestors arrived as slaves, indentured laborers or who were natives overrun by the new nation, fought desperate battles to gain access to its bounty — citizenship, voting rights, equal education, equal opportunity and the right to speak out and demonstrate against policies denying that access.

Ethical Governance Day is a modest symbol of our recommitment to that bounty in Miami-Dade County. It may appear to be a small step, but what we need now is any step to make progress toward a government that we can expect to act ethically and honorably.

Anyone wishing to join us on Oct. 22 can do so by emailing us at ethics@miamidade.gov or by visiting our website at ethics.miamidade.gov.

The community conversation that resumes that day is as important for the adults involved as it is for the students. We need more intergenerational and cross-cultural conversations about our political system if we are to transcend the racial, ethnic and class divisions that impede political awareness. We need more discussion and more education about the values that will ultimately uphold the integrity of local government. We need to inspire change.

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