

Help make students citizens of integrity

BY JOSEPH M. CENTORINO - ETHICS.MIAMIDADE.GOV

09/26/2014 7:42 PM | Updated: 09/26/2014 7:42 PM

Former FBI Director Louis Freeh once recalled the moment he was first inspired to join the Bureau. It was the appearance of a police officer in his New Jersey elementary school classroom for a community service presentation.

Freeh's observation that, "little classroom moments like that can color our whole lives," is the best advertisement I can think of for Ethical Governance Day in Miami-Dade County, designated by the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics to be held on Oct. 29 this year.

That Wednesday, as many as 300 volunteer speakers with diverse backgrounds will enter Miami-Dade Public School classrooms across the district to discuss a precious commodity – citizenship – and its role in promoting ethical government.

Democracy can be fragile, tilting with the winds of generational change, political upheaval and the evolving or dissolving of civic faith. There cannot be good government without the anchor of good citizenship.

The myriad factors affecting our politics might often seem out of our personal control, but as the late U.S. Speaker of the House Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill famously repeated, all politics are local. And for most of us, the influence we are most readily able to exert on the process is within our own communities.

Ethical Governance Day is more than a "career day" in the public schools. It was conceived as a means of drawing upon the collective wisdom and experience of local civic leaders by having them speak directly to the next generation of voters about our political system and the critical role they must play in it.

Anyone who even casually follows local politics is aware of enough corrupt and unethical activity in local government to feel distrust in the process. Yet, there are many honest and capable public officials, as well as community-minded attorneys, professionals and business leaders, who daily labor to improve civic life in Miami-Dade County.

The youth of this community need to meet and speak with these people.

Students who have spent the greater part of their lives under the often-unappreciated influence of authority figures, or the undue influence of scornful peers, narrow-minded partisans or agenda-driven media pundits, might be unduly susceptible to the negative, the cynical, and the sensational when it comes to the political process.

Youth are hungry for straight talk from the outside world that they have been longing to enter. Their views could be positively influenced by anyone who speaks to them with the credibility of street-wise experience. Some of them have not had a serious conversation with an adult except for a parent or teacher about the importance of civic involvement.

It is time that we engaged them in that conversation.

Civic education, in whatever form it exists, might come from home, school or the media. Nothing can replace these influences, but they can and should be supplemented and informed by direct contact with adults who have experience in political, legal or civic affairs.

That is where Ethical Governance Day and any other program espousing civic engagement can play a constructive role. In an unscripted dialogue between a student and a credible civic leader, a constricted view of our political system can be broadened. A memorable turn of phrase or personal anecdote might be the catalyst toward a lifetime of greater citizenship.

The hope is that some of those who hear these speakers and engage in these conversations will be ready for more involvement as they enter a challenging world.

Over the last couple of years, some of the most positive feedback we have received for this program has come from those who have volunteered to speak in a classroom. Their presentations might have varied in their impact, but they have resulted in mind-opening experiences for students as well as adults.

To take part in the third annual Ethical Governance Day, visit ethics.miamidade.gov or call 305-579-2594. Talking points will be provided, and every effort will be made to place volunteers at times and in high schools most convenient to the speakers.

JOSEPH M. CENTORINO IS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE MIAMI-DADE COMMISSION ON ETHICS & PUBLIC TRUST.



CENTORINO