

Service With a Smile

By Nathaniel Bruno

This may seem like an odd sentiment to express in the climactic days of a contentious presidential election campaign between Republican Sen. John McCain and Democrat Sen. Barack Obama, but in many ways, I really wish I could vote for both. I know, it isn't fair in any other context to call both heads and tails. And it may appear contradictory to imply that any one person could honestly support each of two candidates with such starkly contrasting views on tax policy, health care policy, and so on. So allow me to explain, and offer some thoughts on how one theme of this campaign may be of particular consequence to those of us who work in the legal profession.

Regardless of how anyone evaluates the substance of either candidate's specific domestic and foreign policy initiatives, there is one measure on which both men are equally deserving of respect and imitation: their inspirational commitment to service. Both major party candidates have demonstrated in their own lives the importance of service over self-aggrandizement, and have consistently applied their servant-hearted characters toward different but equally admirable activities. McCain as a military fighter pilot and prisoner of war. Obama as a community organizer in the urban inner city and civil rights lawyer. Both as distinguished elected officials.

And apart from their engagement in service-oriented pursuits, both candidates have also extolled in their rhetoric, often with stirring oratory, the virtues of charitable and public service. McCain is fond of reminding listeners that "every one of us has a duty to serve a cause greater than our self-interest," making that phrase a central refrain of his campaign, all under the auspices of his "Country First" theme. And in his speech accepting the Republican Party nomination to run for president, McCain proclaimed, "If you find faults with our country, make it a better one ... Feed a hungry child. Teach an illiterate adult to

read. Comfort the afflicted. Defend the rights of the oppressed. Our country will be the better, and you will be the happier. Because nothing brings greater happiness in life than to serve a cause greater than yourself."

Obama has expressed similar adulation for service and self-sacrifice. His December 2007 speech entitled "A Call to Serve" was a rallying cry of praise for those who lead lifestyles of community service, as well as a description of the variety of national service corps programs he hopes to create or expand to give all Americans fertile outlets for volunteer service. He exhorted listeners that, "We need your service, right now, in this moment - our moment" in the hope this will one day be seen as the time that "history bent once more in the direction of justice." Obama consistently emphasizes that the positive change needed in this country must happen "not from the top-down — but from the bottom-up," and in his speech accepting the Democratic Party nomination to run for president, he vowed to "keep our promise to every young American — if you commit to serving your community or your country, we will make sure you can afford a college education."

What crystallized this unifying theme of service in my mind was an event in which both candidates participated on Sept. 11, 2008. Both suspended partisan politics for a day of memorial observation, appeared together at Ground Zero in New York City, and took part in a forum sponsored by ServiceNation at Columbia University. The candidates took turns answering questions and sharing their views about the importance of volunteer service to our nation and to each of us as individuals. The forum was prefaced with comments by co-moderator Richard Stengel, who reminded observers that, "Service is not red or blue. It's beyond party or partisanship." Indeed. That campaign forum has been one of the only true moments of harmony and accord in this entire campaign. Remarkably, the candidates actually agreed on something — the fundamental role of volunteer service to the vitality of our nation. Both candidates spoke of the important and beneficial role the government, private companies, faith-based and other

nonprofit organizations, and individual citizens can have on the lives of people less fortunate and on the health and stability of our country and its various communities, all through a commitment to participating in volunteer service opportunities.

Indicative of the candidates' unified message, McCain made a point at the forum of saying, "I applaud Senator Obama's commitment to national service. And he makes a very strong case. And I look forward to joining him no matter what happens in November. This is a cause a lot bigger than anything to do with partisanship." For his part, Obama described in detail his own national service plan, while offering a laudatory assessment of his opponent's service record: "Senator McCain's service is legendary. And one of the wonderful things about this campaign, I think, is his ability to share that story and himself inspire a whole generation of young people to model what he did for this country. And so I think that one of the primary objectives of my presidency would be to lift up the opportunities for service in a bipartisan fashion so that we take it out of politics." The candidates even joked about appointing each other to cabinet-level positions overseeing national service. It is difficult to think of any subject that has engendered this sort of camaraderie.

As I watched the forum unfold in real time, I was struck, for the first time in this general election campaign season, with a real sense of pride and purpose. There were no attack ads or assertions of guilt by association. Here was a moment of great unity,

borne out of a day of great tragedy, reminding us of the shared humanitarian values that make our nation exceptional, and pointing us toward an enduring commitment to selfless service and investment in each other. Our leaders were calling us all to serve. And it forced me to analyze whether I am spending my own time in a manner worthy of the ideals articulated by these candidates.

For those of us in the legal profession (at least for me), it's easy to get bogged down in the anxiety and intensity of billing hours and striving for success, sometimes to the exclusion of the more compassionate and community-oriented outlets for legal service. I am constantly forced to remind myself that success and significance are two separate concepts. Success in the legal profession will likely matter very little if we have not also achieved a sense of significance by having made a lasting positive impact on the lives of people who are in a position to benefit from our legal training along the way.

Pro bono service is the best way I know for lawyers to invest ourselves in the type of charitable and volunteer service called for by the current presidential candidates. We may not be at stages in our lives where it is practical to join the Peace Corps, or start a nonprofit or take a position at Legal Aid. But lawyers are problem-solvers, and we can all commit to helping solve the problems

of pro bono clients, one at a time. We can assist one person with special needs at a time to obtain disability benefits, or volunteer at one pro bono legal clinic a month to give advice and comfort to young women victimized by domestic violence, or provide pro bono assistance to one family at a time dealing with a troublesome immigration issue. All of those "one at a times" will add up to the type of positive change both candidates are seeking to effectuate. None of us will get to the end of our lives and simply wish we would have spent more time in the office.

But we may wish we had spent more time making a salutary difference in the lives of other people in our sphere of influence.

So in the wake of that inspirational campaign forum, I renewed my own personal commitment to being involved in at least one pro bono legal project at a time. And I decided to find at least one volunteer service opportunity to participate in each month this year. I don't share those things out of any sense of superiority. Quite the opposite. I'm actually embarrassed that my life is often so disconnected from the palpable needs of other people and the community that I have to make a specific effort to get involved and serve.

But I share my personal reflections to point out that maybe elections really do matter. Because in their best moments, it is sometimes our presidential candidates who can best remind us of what really does matter. And whichever candidate we pull the lever for this year, may we all be unified in finding ways to make pro bono service a regular part of the daily campaigns of our own lives.

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