



by Hon. Michael J. Newman

FJA–FBA Essay Contest: “What a Fair and Impartial Federal Judiciary Means to Me and to the United States”

This April, the Federal Judges Association (FJA) and the Federal Bar Association (FBA) co-sponsored an essay contest for high school students as part of a joint effort celebrating the 225th anniversary of the federal courts and Article III of the U.S. Constitution.

It highlighted the role of the federal courts in a free society and afforded students an opportunity to learn more about their government and its history.

The topic asked students to consider “What a Fair and Impartial Federal Judiciary Means to Me and to the United States.” Nearly 60 entries were received from all over the country. The students described how an independent, fair, and impartial federal judiciary has shaped their lives and communities. Some drew on personal experiences; others discussed the global impact of the federal courts. All of the submissions were well thought out and insightful.

As chair of the essay committee, I was honored to work with my fellow committee members: Alfredo Castellanos; Laura Conover; Sharon Lovejoy; Fritz Wermuth; and Elizabeth Woodcock. We judged the essays for content, grammar, style, and creativity.

The FJA and FBA are proud to announce the winning entries. First place was awarded to Beth Anne Leon, a student at the iPrep Academy in Miami; second place was awarded to Gabriel Rosen of the Stuyvesant High School in New York City; and the third place—a tie—was awarded to Charles Vojta of the Blake School in Minneapolis and Emma Ronzetti of the Ransom Everglades School in Coconut Grove, Fla. Selected excerpts from the winning essays follow:

The personification of a fair and impartial federal court is accurately captured in an image of Lady Justice, a blindfolded woman, holding a balance scale in one hand and a sword in the other. The blindfold (according to Roman folklore) represents the ability of the court to view parties and arguments objectively, without persuasion toward or against the influence of money, power, weakness, or skin color. The balance scales represent

each side of the argument, and the sword symbolizes the power of justice and reason.

Beth Anne Leon

In short, citizens can only be given a fair chance to exercise their inalienable rights contained within the Declaration of Independence of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness if the legal system is able to safeguard avenues of redress and provide equal protections to all citizens. Thus, a judiciary steeped within the principles of impartiality serves as a shield for all no matter their socioeconomic status.

Gabriel Rosen

This willingness to rule fairly, to correct the injustices in our system even at the smallest level, is in no small part a product of the federal judiciary’s independence. Often times the rulings judges make upset a large majority of people, and in other systems of governance these rulings would carry heavy consequences. Yet our system of independence protects these judges and allows them to make the rulings they find necessary. Through this they are able to ensure people’s rights, ensure the fairness of our judiciary and our government as a whole, and ensure the continued well-being of our Constitution.

Charles Vojta

If judges were susceptible to the corruption of fairness, life in America would surely not be as it is today. Righteousness would fall by the wayside, for as Francis Bacon once said, “If we do not maintain justice, justice will not maintain us.” As a direct result of impartiality in federal courts, I was able to attend G.W. Carver Middle School, a school that was once segregated. I cannot

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Hon. Michael Newman, a U.S. Magistrate Judge for the Southern District of Ohio, is The Federal Lawyer’s judicial profiles editor. He also sits on The Federal Lawyer editorial board. Judge Newman’s Federal Bar Association service is extensive and includes term as president of both the Cincinnati-Northern Kentucky and Dayton, Ohio, chapters, as well as service on the Board of Directors. He is chair of the Federal Bar Association’s national Magistrate Judge Task Force.



Casey Rodgers, and the Hon. Karen K. Specie. Following each panel, the speakers joined discussion groups—each a combined mix of experienced lawyers, new lawyers, law students, and other legal professionals—to address the leadership gap. At the end of each discussion round, table moderators shared their table’s discussion with all attendees.

Discussion topics varied at each table, as did solutions. On the topic of professional confidence, table moderator Erin Jackson noted that women are often the harshest critics of other women, particularly in the workplace. Rather than criticize, she encouraged women to pull each other up to foster open dialogue about children, career plans, and accommodations. Similarly, table moderator Cherie Fine encouraged women to be brave and request the accommodations they need—and in the process, make the workplace a better environment for everyone. By contrast, table moderator Lea Johnston opined that employers—not employees—should carry the burden of discussing accommodations for men and women alike who struggle to balance work and family.

On the topic of law firms as businesses, table moderator Meshon Rawls called for a shift away from traditional billable hours—a notoriously burdensome system for women balancing motherhood and careers—and refocusing on other ways that female attorneys bring value to firms. Table moderator Susanne Bullard proposed an alternative solution to the billable hour predicament: institutional flexibility, so that women can work

remotely when needed and still fulfill their required hours. Table moderator Dawn Vallejos-Nichols provided yet another alternative: restructuring private firms to be more like government practice, accompanied with flexible hours.

Other attendees opined that the problem will solve itself with time. In the words of table moderator AuBroncee Martin, this is not a revolution; it is an evolution. Large numbers of female law students continue to enroll in school around the country and new attorneys have stronger mentor–mentee relationships, with male and female attorneys alike, than those that existed just a decade ago. Many attorneys are optimistic that the legal profession is changing, albeit slowly, and female leadership will soon be on the rise.

The most important lesson discussed at the leadership roundtable is the power of conversation. In one afternoon, dozens of attorneys, judges, and legal professionals came to the table to address a topic of utmost concern. And while no one identified a single solution to the problem, conversations started at discussion roundtables raised awareness of topics infrequently discussed. Now that the conversation has begun, we encourage everyone to continue it in their workplace: partners, talk to your associates about the quality of their work and the value they bring to your firm. Associates, talk to your bosses about accommodations you need to succeed in the legal profession. Students, talk to potential employers about your work and life goals; do not leave before you leave. The more we talk, the closer we come to finding a solution. ☉



Table moderator Marcy LaHart shares her table’s discussion with other attendees.



Stephanie Marchman, chair of the North Central Florida Chapter Membership and Planning Committee, presents a video clip titled “Great Expectations for Female Lawyers” from *The New York Times*.

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begin to imagine life had I not gone to that school, or life without my best friend, Mya, who could not have attended with me in a segregated classroom. Without the courts, society would not have changed for the better, and I would probably not be able to go to school with my best friend. Former Chief Justice Earl Warren said, “It is the spirit and not the form of law that keeps justice alive.” I believe that the evenhandedness and independence of federal courts is the spirit that keeps justice in the United States alive.

Emma Ronzetti

I congratulate and commend these students for their excellent work. I also thank the FJA and the FBA for the honor of leading this committee and for their continuing, combined efforts to teach civics to high school students, expose those students to the important work of the federal courts, and strengthen the relationship between the federal judiciary and the people it serves. ☉