

The Through-Line in a Career of Public Service

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As a first-generation American, I was raised to believe any one person can make a difference. Like many children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, I was drawn to public service, inspired by a combination of patriotism and civic duty to address the most pressing challenges in society. I went to law school, had a fulfilling career in public law and, after 9/11, turned my focus to the non-profit sector.

For me, watching the events of 9/11 created a moment of hyper-focus on anti-US and anti-Zionist extremism. When the opportunity arose the following year, I joined the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) as the Los Angeles Regional Director. The challenges we faced were daunting. Besides extremist rhetoric against the United States and Israel, ADL focused on nationalism and Islamophobia, an emerging prevalence of cyberbullying, a struggle on college campuses to balance free speech with the desire for an open and welcoming environment, a growing wealth gap and, by 2008, an economic crisis. During it all, I helped ADL LA navigate its role fighting hate and building bridges to meet each challenge.

While there was no single moment of hyper-focus comparable to 9/11 for me, watching events unfold in the 2016 election and in the warm-up to the 2020 election created a shift in my focus to the increasing polarization of our communities, our methods of engaging, and our sources of information. According to a January 24, 2020, report by the Pew Research Center, “Republicans and Democrats place their trust in two nearly inverse news media environments.” The report concludes that “partisan polarization in the use and trust of media sources has widened in the past five years.” This polarization has hampered responsible and effective social interaction.

In 2020, polarization is only getting worse. The coronavirus pandemic is one new source of divisiveness. Our national reckoning with systemic racism and police abuse, triggered by the brutal killing of George Floyd and too many others, has also contributed to political discord. And, unquestionably, the presidential election has further exacerbated the divide, even among friends and family.

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In August, after 18 years at ADL, I started a new role as president of Constitutional Rights Foundation (CRF). CRF is a non-partisan, non-profit organization whose mission since 1962 is to bring civics education to schools, especially in underserved areas. It does this through teacher training, civic action programs, law-related education, internships, and a host of other programs designed to create the next generation of informed and engaged citizens.

I knew that my experience at ADL would translate well. Both organizations change society through education and participation: ADL provides resources in anti-bias education and engages young people to stand up to hatred and anti-Semitism; CRF provides resources in civics education and engages young people to become active citizens.

Both organizations also hold a keen recognition that enduring change requires more than angry invective—it requires knowledge about government and civil discourse skills to effectively bring about change. According to the 2018 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics assessment, U.S. 8th graders scored, on average, just three points higher than they did in 1998, but still well below NAEP proficiency in knowledge of government and civil society. Yet, during the same two decades, we have seen a continued marginalization of civics education, once required for and foundational to public education.

Creating enduring change also requires giving a voice to the voiceless. There is no better way to mitigate the effects of out-of-control political polarization. At ADL, I learned that if we want to remove hate and anti-Semitism from society, we must teach students how to stand up for others and for themselves. I now bring to CRF the viewpoint that, if we want to remediate disenfranchisement and injustice, we must teach students about how government works, how to collaborate, and how to participate and advocate for issues that matter to them.

My job may have changed, but my calling to public service has not. Societal ills may have shifted, but the most effective antidote has not. I still believe one person can make a difference. I am still drawn to the work of giving people the tools to make their own difference.

The through-line is empowerment.

Amanda Susskind assumed the role of president of Constitutional Rights Foundation in August, after 18 years as ADL's Los Angeles Regional Director.