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Nevada Youth Learn About Voting Rights

By Rachel J. Anderson

Prior to the 2014 mid-term elections, the ACLU filed a federal lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of Wisconsin's Voter ID law. On October 9, 2014, the U.S. Supreme Court blocked implementation of the law on the grounds that implementing the law so close to a general election date would prove problematic and an unreasonable obstacle to voting. The Court noted that some municipal clerks' offices had already sent out absentee ballots with no instructions stating that voters would be required to present a valid, government-issued photo ID. While the U.S. Supreme Court blocked the law, it did not come to any conclusions about its constitutionality. Unresolved questions of the constitutionality of voter ID sets the stage for future debate on the issue. Experts agree that the legal struggle will likely continue, especially in states such as Kansas, Texas, Indiana, Tennessee, Mississippi, Georgia and Virginia, which have the strictest laws requiring a government-issued photo ID.

After its passage and enforcement, the Voting Rights Act added voters to the voting rolls. Now, we see the emergence of measures that are designed to decrease and remove voters – African American voters in particular -- from the voter rolls.

So, have we made progress? If so, is it sustainable? Are there lessons to be learned from the past 60 years and the news of today? I believe the answer to each of these questions is, "Yes." But, at the same time, we must acknowledge that the rights of minorities must be part of an ongoing effort. We must be vigilant. We must work to protect these rights.

One final thought. The struggles African Americans have experienced throughout history are of vital importance. We must remain vigilant in the protection of our precious rights in order for our voices to be heard and in order to "have a seat at the table" in the future. But in the greater context, we must remember this: if the voting rights of African Americans can be impaired or restricted, so too can the rights of any American. So, let us stand up, for our community, and for all Americans, and let us say "no" to the denial of the basic freedoms and certain inalienable rights with which all Americans were endowed by their Creator.

Earlier this year, and for the second consecutive year, the Las Vegas Chapter of the National Bar Association (LVNBA), together with local partners, organized a voting rights project for youth in Nevada.

High school government classes teach students about voting rights and advanced citizenship. However, the classrooms, by nature, cannot alone provide experiential learning experiences. To meet this need, in 2014 Professor Rachel Anderson, President of the LVNBA, and Dr. Zachary Robbins, Clark County (Nevada) School District Principal, collaborated to create the Youth Voting Rights Project. The project began in 2014 with middle school students and evolved in 2015 to include high school students.

Many of the effects of the 2013 *Shelby County v. Holder* decision are expected to be felt at the state and municipal level. The Youth Voting Rights Project educates students about voting rights and Nevada law and brings them onto the University of Nevada, Las Vegas campus. It also enhances their written and oral advocacy skills, puts them in direct contact with law students as role models, increases skills that improve standardized test scores, provides incentives for them to graduate high school and attend college, as well as encouraging them to be engaged and productive residents and citizens. The Youth Voting Rights Project is implemented in several stages.

Case Study Development:

Professor Anderson and Dr. Robbins wrote a case study that is similar to a law school fact pattern based on Anderson's experiences in the voter protection boiler room during the 2012 election. Doreen Spears Hartwell, Past President of the LVNBA, prepared a handout of selected Nevada election statutes.

Working with Teachers:

Professor Anderson and Dr. Robbins met with participating teachers to familiarize them with the case study and educate them about the applicable Nevada election statutes. The teachers then used this information to develop targeted units for their classes. Each student selected one issue out of the case study to analyze and wrote an advocacy letter to a public official. They also prepared a group presentation suggesting a way to remedy the problem they selected.

Law School Field Trip:

The teachers selected 150 students from their classes to take on a trip to the UNLV William S. Boyd School of Law. At the law school they met with current law students to discuss their assignment. The UNLV Admissions Office gave the students tours of the university campus and presentations on navigating the university admissions process. Students ate lunch among the college students in the UNLV campus dining hall. After lunch, Dean Daniel Hamilton spoke to the students and talked about the importance of voting rights. The students then presented their group proposals to Commissioner Lawrence Weekly, a local government official. All of the participating students received a specially designed ID card from the UNLV Card Services Department to commemorate their participation in the project.

As part of the project, Professor Anderson raised funds for the application fees and over 90 students can be admitted to college because of generous donations from LVNBA members, members of the Las Vegas (NV) Chapter of The Links, Incorporated, the Las Vegas National Bar Association Foundation, the Las Vegas Urban Chamber of Commerce, and other Nevada attorneys. The students were pre-selected by the counselors and participated in a workshop held at Cheyenne High School by the Admissions Office

to ensure that all students who apply will also be admitted. On the day of the field trip, students who had been admitted received certificates of admission.

The project would not have been possible without the combined energy and resources of the Cheyenne High School, Las Vegas (NV) Chapter of the Links Incorporated; Las Vegas Chapter of the National Bar Association; UNLV Admissions Office; UNLV Black Law Students Association; UNLV Card Services Department, and the UNLV William S. Boyd School of Law.

Professor Anderson and Dr. Robbins said they were "excited to continue to educate youth about their rights so they can engage in advanced citizenship and so that future generations are empowered by the law and are able to shape the future for themselves, their children, and their children's children. It is an honor and a privilege to have an opportunity to make this contribution to youth, communities of color, and the nation as a whole. We hope this project will become a model for schools and universities around the country."



Rachel J. Anderson is a Professor of Law at the UNLV William S. Boyd School of Law. She earned her M.A. from Stanford University and her Juris Doctor at the University of California, Berkeley, where she served as Articles Editor on the California Law Review, Executive Editor on the Berkeley Journal of International Law, and Managing Editor of the Berkeley Journal of African-American Law & Policy. Professor Anderson's research and teaching focus on business law, civil and human rights, empirical legal studies, and international law.