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Tazewell County Board

Continuing a Family Tradition of Community Service

December 1st, 2009

December ASO Magazine Column

Judging Clarity

At a recent local candidate forum, a local judicial candidate grabbed my attention with his stump speech. For those of you not familiar with that term, stump speech came about from the political campaigns of the 18th and early 19th centuries before technology allowed for the broadcast of candidates' speeches. At that time, candidates would go from town to town repeating the same speech and in order to be seen and heard by all, they would simply pull over a barrel, or stand on a large rock, or in many cases find the nearest stump to stand on to address the crowds. Thus, today whenever we hear a candidate find a speech or even just a phrase or two that works for them and they use it throughout the campaign, we call it a stump speech.

Okay, back to my recent local candidate forum and the judicial candidate that grabbed my attention. For those of you not from the 10th Circuit Judicial District, we currently have six Republican Judicial Candidates running for two different Circuit Judge positions. There is nothing grand, fancy or attractive about judicial races. They are by far the least understood and recognizable of the political campaign process. Add to the mix six candidates for two separate positions, and it gets really confusing who is running against whom. At this forum, one candidate stood out from the rest of the crowd.

John Vespa (www.vespaforjudge.com) is currently a defense lawyer in Peoria, but before that he was a Peoria County Sheriff's Deputy, which is unique enough to make him stand out. Maybe it was this hard work, common man background that influenced his stump speech. Add to this the fact that his older brother, the very highly respected Judge Joe Vespa, currently holds the judicial seat he is running for and that makes it more interesting and helps him stand out.

At this event though, it was his stump speech that got my attention. While the others got up and spoke about all of the awards they received in college, about their family and significant others, about who they knew and who they were related to, John Vespa talked about what he saw as an issue with society and what he was going to do about it. He talked about the growing "gray space" and the blurring of the lines of right and wrong. He talked about how if elected he would rule from the bench based on following the law strictly, with a clear understanding and belief in right and wrong and paying the consequences for one's actions and decisions.

This got my attention. While I have reservations on the abilities of legislative bodies to govern morality, right and wrong, the judicial system does have the power to do this effectively or at least show what happens to those that have decided not to. We have seen the negative effects of legislative bodies trying to govern morality with the failed prohibition of alcohol and several failed attempts to stem crime with gun control measures, although this last failure is still being preached actively today. These attempts to shape morality failed because the governmental body attempted to regulate the effect of the act rather than the cause of the act. Because alcohol was being abused by a few, they outlawed it for all. Rather than holding those few abusers responsible for their actions, they went after everyone. Rather than hold the few responsible, they made criminals of all.

In the case of gun control, we have tried for years to stop crime by removing the weapons used in crime. To do this, we have made it harder and harder for the law-abiding citizen to purchase firearms. The result has been nothing has changed in the growth of crime. Statistics have shown that with all we have done to restrict firearms, the result is more crime. In countries where they have gone farther than we have to restrict firearms, crime rates have not changed at all and in some cases have actually increased. Legislative bodies are not the answer to changing the morality of the citizens.

What has changed over the past decade is our understanding and relationship with “right and wrong” and the ever growing “gray area” we allow more and more decisions to fall into. Too many of us have become accustomed to allowing outside elements, unrelated prior incidents and activities to become part of the decision of what is right and wrong. We have become over-obsessed with understanding the criminal rather than judging the crime.

This is why Mr. Vespa’s stump speech got my attention. Judges have the ability to affect morality by setting an example of what happens to those that break the law; those that violate the moral compass we have established. Too many of our judges (many of whom seem to live on the west coast) have become accustomed to allowing more and more cases to fall into this ever growing “gray area” and refuse to take action on the law.

While the rest of the crowd discussed their qualifications and relationships, which are important, John Vespa told the audience what he was going to do to help society today, and in doing so, in declaring a course of action for the future, has set himself apart from the judicial crowd in this upcoming election. If you live in Tazewell, Peoria, Marshall, Putnam and Stark Counties, please review and consider John Vespa (www.VespaforJudge.com) not because he is related to someone or for what he has done in law school decades ago but because of the clear vision he has set. If you live outside the Illinois 10th Circuit Judicial District, demand the same high-level expectations from your judicial candidates. By doing so, by electing judges with a clear vision of right and wrong, we can start to regain society’s moral compass.

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