

Restoring civility starts with restoring respect



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Over the past month I have had the privilege of attending various meetings of both the Pensacola City Council and the Escambia County Board of County Commissioners — formal business meetings, agenda conferences, workshops, and committees of the whole.

I refer to attending these meetings as a privilege because it is. Regardless of one's feelings about how our local bodies politic conduct themselves or whether you see them as well-oiled machines or dysfunctional families, the mere fact that these bodies exist and that we can attend their meetings is privilege.

We must always remember that while our systems of self-governance are not and can never be perfect, there are millions of men and women the world over who only dream of someday having the voice at all levels of their governments that we enjoy.

Over the summer the Institute for Women in Politics of Northwest Florida (IWP) developed a three-year plan of programs and activities, goals and objectives to be pursued by four visioning teams. You will hear more about these plans in upcoming pieces. One of those

teams is the Civility Team, whose work it will be to establish IWP as “the champion for civility in politics in Northwest Florida.”

As I sat through these many meetings, it occurred to me that perhaps civility begins with respect and respect begins with decorum. What prompted this particular realization? It was noticing time after time that many in attendance looked as though they had just come from the beach or a workout or from knocking back a cold one at the local pub.

Some people who attend these meetings may be homeless or poor, but most are neither of these. It should not be a stretch for them to slip out of their boardshorts and into a pair of khakis or to trade their faded, holey jeans for a pair of crisp, dark denims. It should not be too much to expect gentlemen to wear shirts with sleeves, if not collars, and ladies to don something slightly higher-end than shorts that are both too short and too fitted for the occasion.

Call me out of touch, call me “old school,” but I still believe how you look influences how you feel and how you feel influences how you treat others. Maybe we can positively affect the tone and tenor of government body meetings simply by taking a moment to ensure that we are dressed respectably and respectfully, so that respectful attire might inspire a respectful tone and a respectful tone might inspire respectful

discourse.

Speaking of tone and discourse, I have also noticed how many speakers, elected officials and citizens alike, scream into the microphone to make their points. Stop doing that; just stop it. It is neither respectful nor civil and most of the time it serves only to dilute, rather than amplify, the speaker's message. When we address one another calmly, rationally and respectfully, we are much more likely to be taken seriously and to inspire compromise where there is divisiveness.

Civility is a big idea. It's not just being nice. As P.M. Forni, co-founder of the Johns Hopkins Civility Project, points out in his book “*Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct*,” “It is complex and encompasses learning how to connect successfully and live well with others, developing thoughtfulness, and fostering effective self-expression and communication.”

To do our part to restore and preserve it in the political arena, let's each start small by showing up respectfully attired and with a civil mindset. Maybe, just maybe, our civility will rub off on others.

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