A Tale of Two Forums: Updates from Tifton and Atlanta

Report by: Jan Levinson

The Russell Forum for Civil Life in Georgia hosted two forums since last we reported. The first deliberation, “News Media and Society, How to Restore the Public Trust” took place on Thursday, October 9th at the Welcome Station in downtown Tifton, Georgia. A small but mighty crowd of participants gathered to consider the widespread mistrust of the modern media in America and the steps we must take to re-establish trust once placed in newspapers, reporters, and broadcasters. Co-moderating this forum were Dr. Margaret Holt, a retired professor from UGA, and Dr. Veronica Adams-Cooper, a professor of Sociology at Albany State University. Students Kelly Frizzell (UGA) and Stefon Plummer (Albany State University) tended to the duties of observing and recording the events of the deliberation, respectively.

The night’s discussion was varied, but continually turned back to the blurring of lines between news, media, and propaganda. Comments frequently expressed a fear that many Americans don’t differentiate between television personalities who express opinions versus viable newspapers and nightly news programs which report facts. Even then, the crowd drew distinctions between local and national news sources – feeling that they could count on their local newspaper much more than many national sources which tend to reflect left or right-leaning biases.
Although this crowd had a lively discussion with differing perspectives, they expressed a shared concern for this problem, especially in light of the recent economic crisis – this is a time when Americans need to be able to trust in their new sources. They favored Approach 3 (get citizens involved), and the idea that it is up to citizens to “use the off button” and develop alternative news sources until the main stream media responds to an increasing demand for honest, solid reporting of events.

On Monday, October 13th the venue was the Carter Presidential Library in Atlanta. The topic, “What is the 21st Century Mission for Public Schools.” A crowd of twenty men and women tore through this issue with passion and enduring vigor – leaving barely a silent moment in the two hour deliberation. Dr. Marshalita Peterson, a professor of education at Spelman College, moderated this forum with introductions from Dr. Margaret Holt. Jill Severn ably returned to the role of recorder, while Jan Levinson served as an observer for this event. Of all the forums held this fall, the crowd in Atlanta on this occasion certainly proved to be the most lively and outspoken thus far.

A kick-off question from the moderator: Before reading any of the literature provided at the forum, what would you have said should be the mission of our public schools? Some responded that we should return to an emphasis on basic skills (reading, writing, and arithmetic) which serve as the building blocks for everything else. Others favored helping students to become good citizens, infusing the classroom with global perspective, or focusing on the skills that would prove useful in the workplace. The varied responses to this initial question set the tone for a great deliberation.

Highlights from this discussion:

- In discussing Approach 1 (preparing students for the workplace) many suggested that we can’t anticipate what the workplace will be forty years from now – so how would we decide what skills to teach now?

- Some favored the idea of incorporating more technology and felt that this approach is a way of infusing what is learned inside the classroom with applicability to the real world – something that might help students stay focused and engaged.

- Feelings on Approach 2 (preparing students to be thoughtful citizens) were mixed. While many expressed that they liked this model the best, they wrestled with how it could be implemented effectively into a curriculum without being too overt.

- One very thoughtful comment was that teaching citizenship in schools doesn’t replace what is learned at home – but it does reinforce those ideas and shows kids other examples of respect and civic engagement in teachers and peers.

- When comments turned to the promises of presidential candidates, one participant relayed dismay that the refrain “the children are our future” has become nothing more than a good sound bite. Lightening the mood, another participant added that we can always just “drill baby drill” for more children....
Approach 3 (help students discover and develop individual talents) received mixed reviews – participants favored the notion of smaller class size and greater community involvement, but worried that public schools are not a place to specialize talents. It is important for a student to know what he or she is good at – but also important to know their weaknesses and learn to cope with more difficult subjects and concepts.

For more information on the Russell Forum for Civic Life in Georgia, visit http://www.libs.uga.edu/russell/rfclg, call (706) 542-5788, or email russellforum@gmail.com