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Touring the state refreshes faith in what unites lawyers

We're reminded every day that we live in an age of division. Entropy and conflict can seem inevitable. We split along political lines, class lines, cultural lines, geographical lines, and nearly every other line defined. We're told that lawyers are no exception. We see less of each other than we used to, we listen to one another less than we used to and, as a result, we understand less about each other than we once did.

That's all true enough, but it's not the whole truth.

Over the course of the last year, I had the pleasure of traveling around Illinois in my capacity as president of the Appellate Lawyers Association. The ALA held events in every corner of the state, from Chicago to Collinsville and points in between. I drove through cities, suburbs and small towns. I met with supreme court justices, appellate court justices, and practicing lawyers as diverse in their opinions as they are in their geography.

To my surprise, the thing that stood out most was not their differences, but their similarities. The constant refrain I heard throughout the state was unspoken — few if any lawyers with whom I spoke discussed our divisions.

I struck up a conversation with a lawyer while we waited

on a buffet line at an event downstate, closer to Nashville than Chicago. After exchanging pleasantries, he said he didn't care for a trend he was noticing in his daily practice. I braced myself assuming — wrongly — that what came next would be something with which I disagreed and would have to manage.

But the affront never came. He spoke instead about how he's noticed other lawyers increasingly assuming the worst of each other. Presumptions about bad faith and bad intentions were becoming a starting point, not a conclusion at which one reluctantly arrived.

As my newfound friend lamented this growing tendency, I realized that although I agreed with every word he said, I had just moments ago been guilty of much the same offense. I assumed that, solely because of our location, he was about to launch into some vaguely insulting diatribe. That stayed with me.

As the year went on and I visited other parts of the state, speaking with lawyers and judges from a wide array of communities, I continued to listen for the kind of divisive sentiments I'd expected would be a regular, if unwelcome, fixture of conversation. Surely, those living in high-rise towers would have little



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in common with those living on farms — and both groups would have something to say about that.

But with few exceptions, I didn't hear it. Everyone talked about how good it was to be back in each other's company, about the challenges their legal communities faced or about a new Supreme Court decision. Little if any mention was made of partisan politics, culture war topics and the like.

Of course, some of this may be attributable to the art of polite conversation and professional decorum, but

the absence of such debate was too regular a thing to be only that.

After driving past more towns and cornfields than I could count, and sitting down with lawyers in Chicago, Elgin, LaSalle and Springfield, among other places, it became unexpectedly clear to me in those quiet moments on the open road that what unites us as lawyers is far more telling of our daily lives than what divides us. Whether we live in Chicago or Du Quoin (population 5,800), most of us joined the practice of law to help others. As pessimistic and downright cranky as our experiences have conditioned us to sometimes be, most of us started from a place of idealism and — even if only in fits and starts — we're still living that intention.

I don't write this out of naivete, but rather candor. The cynicism we often indulge in can be born of easy ignorance as much as hard-fought experience. Traveling around the state over the last year taught me to assume the better of my peers' motivations and intentions. And we would, I think, do well to use that understanding as a starting point when dealing with one another, even as adversaries, and working toward the common project that is the betterment of the law.