

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND EDUCATION—A CHIEF PASSION  
FOR THE CHIEF, CHRISTINE DURHAM

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It was September 2008, a beautiful fall day in Utah. Utah Supreme Court Chief Justice Christine Durham had just received the 2008 Excellence in Ethics award from the Center for the Study of Ethics (“CSE”) at Utah Valley University. As part of the Ethics Forum and the Utah Democracy Project, the CSE had an opportunity to interview Christine Durham. It was a delightful opportunity to get to know her better.

We conversed about many things in the hour time slot that was arranged. It was video recorded, and eventually posted on YouTube.<sup>1</sup> Chief Justice Durham had just written an op-ed article in the Salt Lake Tribune; I commented on it. My comment hit a nerve in Justice Durham. The name of the piece was “Stronger civics education would aid American citizens and democracy.”<sup>2</sup>

It was a good nerve; she was passionate about civic engagement, or lack thereof in young people. She was most interested in this subject, and it was discussed at some length. “We have in the last 30 years lost sight of that foundational mission of public education to prepare young people for citizenship.”<sup>3</sup>

She was heartened by the engagement of young people in the 2008 McCain-Obama presidential election and hoped that students would understand that their vote was important. However, she opined that:

I feel very strongly that the degree of alienation, of opting out of civic disengagement that we’ve been noting for a couple of decades now in college students, high school students, and young adults (and the research suggests, by

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<sup>1</sup> See *UVU: Discussion on Democracy Episode 3*, YOUTUBE (May 6, 2010), [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXEz\\_6Rhiyk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXEz_6Rhiyk).

<sup>2</sup> Christine M. Durham, *Stronger Civics Education Would Aid American Citizens and Democracy*, THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE (Sept. 16, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> *UVU: Discussion on Democracy Episode 3*, *supra* note 1.

the way, that one's patterns of political engagement are pretty well set in college) that if you get through college without any sense of obligation to engage with your community, you'll probably spend most of the rest of your life that way.<sup>4</sup>

She noted it was a distressing issue to her. We asked how civics education could be accomplished. She stated that the Utah Board of Education had put in place a mandatory course in civics. Social studies is now required in every curriculum.

And she noted that the pedagogy for civics can be very engaging, with mock trials, trips to the legislature, city council meetings, etc. More than ever, she opined, young people will get turned on by learning more about civic engagement.

This was not idle talk for the chief justice. She chairs the Utah Coalition for Civic, Character and Service Learning Board. It is an umbrella agency that involves over 30 different organizations including We the People and law related programs. Its mission is to instill in K-16 students the desire to become engaged citizens, who, with their community partners, are endowed with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and confidence to participate fully in democratic life. The collaborative effort of the Coalition is intended to increase community awareness of this civic education work and the need for engaged citizenship.<sup>5</sup>

It is a grass roots organization.

Along with that, the Chief was a commissioner on a statutorily created commission called the Utah Commission on Civic and Character Education. This commission was created in 2005 and funded for five years. It was involved in voter registration, high school voter education, and mock elections.

Her civic education views were also included in ABA Resolution 300:

By teaching civics to every student, our future citizens will acquire the knowledge and dispositions that self-government demands . . . Civic education helps students engage with others of differing views. Debates in the classroom demand that students consider the arguments on both sides of an issue. The process of civil deliberation that leads to reasoned

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<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 24:33.

<sup>5</sup> *The Utah Coalition for Civic Character & Service Learning: Mission Statements for Coalition and Commission*, UTAH LAW & JUSTICE CTR. (Jan. 4, 2012), [http://www.utahciviccoalition.org/coalition\\_mission.html](http://www.utahciviccoalition.org/coalition_mission.html).

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conclusions is not only a vital skill for students' own development, but is at the heart of the process of self-government.<sup>6</sup>

She has been an advocate since the beginning of a civic education movement, which started in 2003.<sup>7</sup> The inaugural Congressional Conference on Civic Education in 2003 succeeded in sparking a nationwide movement to focus attention on the importance of civic engagement and civic education in America.<sup>8</sup> At the second and third conferences in 2004 and 2005, state delegates improved upon initial plans of action developed at the first conference and built further momentum to affect policy changes in their states.<sup>9</sup> The fourth conference was held November 18–20, 2006.<sup>10</sup>

Conferences were attended by state lawmakers, education and community leaders, and always included a strong delegation from Utah.<sup>11</sup> Delegations from all 50 states explored the critical role civic education can play in promoting civic engagement and the need for effective civic education programs in the nation's schools K–16.<sup>12</sup>

State funding dried up for this Coalition because of the recession soon after our 2008 interview with the Chief Justice.<sup>13</sup> However, because of the passion of the Chief, and its members, the Board still meets quarterly, and has a web presence. The Coalition, along with the Salt Lake City Mayor's office is planning a 2012 Dialogue on Democracy, a signature Coalition event, which brings together state and community leaders, legislators, educators, students, professors, judges, mayors, community members and others to discuss the important civic mission of schools for all K–16 students.

Good things came out of this coalition. More civic dialogue, a spark for other government entities to be engaged, and more character education was accomplished.

In the K–16 sector, The Three Branches of Civic Engagement, a Civics Workshop for Teachers and Pre-Service Teachers held in 2008 and 2009 were very successful activities. Teachers learned

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<sup>6</sup> Durham, *supra* note 2; see *Commission On Civic Education in the Nation's Schools*, A.B.A. (Feb. 2011), available at [http://www.abanow.org/wordpress/wp-content/files\\_flutter/1297713769300\\_ThreeHundred\\_2011MY.pdf](http://www.abanow.org/wordpress/wp-content/files_flutter/1297713769300_ThreeHundred_2011MY.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> *The Utah Coalition for Civic Character & Service Learning: History*, UTAH LAW & JUSTICE CTR. (Jan. 4, 2012), [http://www.utahciviccoalition.org/coalition\\_mission.html](http://www.utahciviccoalition.org/coalition_mission.html).

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> Telephone Interview with Kristin Fink, former Coalition Executive Director (Jan. 5, 2012).

about the 3 branches of the Utah government, and among other things, had access to judges' chambers, and the lieutenant governor. A Smart and Good Schools conference was also held.

In the community sector, a Civility Project and Civility Ground Rules were established; and the signature event, Dialogues on Democracy, was held for six years.

Funding does not keep the Chief Justice down:

This is not to say that we (the Coalition) won't do more. We may become re-energized, and do more. Constitutional democracy, the modeling of our process and what democracy means is very important. The Chief has been a very strong advocate for leadership in civic education. She is genuine, down to earth and is open to everybody. She is amazing.<sup>14</sup>

Our interview with the Chief ended on a good note, with her stressing the importance of the independence of the judiciary, not only in decisions but institutionally. And how better can we the people learn these ideas than through civic education? We are so grateful to have this great leader in our state. Thank you, Chief.

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<sup>14</sup> *Id.*