

DEMOCRACY AND OUR NEW CITIZENS' RIGHT TO VOTE

Democracy is not perfect and it is not always clean and neat. However, I still believe it is the best system in the world. Part of our democracy is the right to a jury trial. Many times during jury selection I hear a lawyer ask prospective jurors if they have a case to go to trial, would they rather have a jury or a judge decide the case. I am always surprised when I hear someone say they would rather have a judge decide their case. Collective life experience and common sense of regular citizens from a variety of backgrounds and ethnic groups is what makes our Country and our jury system so unique and so great.

We are having an election here in California this November. We are expected to have only about 20-25% of the registered voters actually turn out and exercise their right to vote. This is a right that Americans have fought and died for over a long period of time. A right that people are willing to risk their own lives and the lives of their children in order to obtain.

There was an election in Scotland this September. The only reason I probably paid attention to it was because that my wife, Janet, has got me hooked on a new TV show called "Outlander" about a woman caught in time travel and forced to live in 17th Century Scotland under pretty harsh conditions. I heard on the news that in this recent election in Scotland, 95% of the Scottish citizens registered to vote and over 90% of them actually showed up at the polls and voted on a decision whether or not to break away from England. They decided to stay, but to me the more important thing was that almost everybody showed up and voted.

Isn't it sad that today, many Americans are too lazy to register to vote or even go to the polls after they have registered. I hope the next generation does a better job of registering voters and getting people out to the polls.

Ironically, one group that seems very excited to exercise their right to vote are the new American citizens who had to overcome hardship in order to get here.

I have had the privilege of representing many people who have come to America as new citizens in order to escape dictatorship, corruption, religious and/or racial intolerance. These new citizens and their families so appreciate our system of justice that protects “the little guy.”

One such family was the Malekian family. George and Gilda Malekian came to this Country with two young daughters as ethnic Armenians from Tehran, Iran. They came here to escape the religious and ethnic persecutions that were taking place in the early 1980's. These persecutions and intolerance were especially bad for girls who wanted to grow up to become professionals. George, who had been a commercial aviation pilot in Iran, was working three jobs here in America in order to provide for his family and give his daughters a good education and the chance to succeed in life.

One Saturday afternoon, they were driving up in the Los Angeles Crest Highway area and pulled over on a dirt vista that was unguarded in order to watch a controlled fire burn up in the mountains. George probably parked a little too close to the edge of the vista turnout and when he went to leave, it is most likely that he accidentally popped the clutch in the wrong gear and the car lurched forward and they went over a 750 foot embankment. The two girls, ages 10 and 14, who were unbelted were ejected through the hatchback and the two parents, who were belted, rode the car down the mountains to their death. This case was a governmental entity case and it was an extremely difficult case to get resolved; however, it eventually did get resolved and the money in the settlement was set up in a trust for the girls who would now be living with their 80-year old grandmother who didn't speak English.

After the case resolved, the girls wrote me a letter that was so powerful and so thoughtful, I thought I would share it with you:

“There are no words to describe the gratitude we feel for what you have done for us, but I’ll try my best to have our appreciate come through this letter. Life, as you know, is filled with surprises and the tragedy that our family endured has been the biggest one yet. However, life is also a combination of mountains and valleys which leads one to expect a high after experiencing a low. In this case, our high has been the fortune of meeting good people like you among others who have helped us along our way. I hope you are aware of the fact that you have truly re-shaped our lives by your outstanding efforts and achievement.

“The mark you have left with us will forever be cherished and remembered. You have given us the wings our parents wanted us to soar with. Though they aren’t present in body, they do live in our hearts and are two angels watching over people like you that have left a lasting effect on our future.

“Thank you ever so much for changing our lives drastically and giving us the luxury of exploring our potential. Seline and I admire the courage and strong will you have displayed and hope to make you as proud as you made us one day. I also want you to know that you have truly inspired us that we can only wish to be given the chance to make a difference in someone else’s life. Thank you once again and may the big man upstairs bless you with health, luck and happiness.

“Sincerely yours, Talin and Seline Malekian”

As a side note, both girls have gone on to graduate from college and are currently working and they are successful.

Never shy away from helping a family who came to America seeking a better life. These families deserve our very best efforts. The joy and satisfaction you will receive when you make a difference in their lives will be immeasurable. Thank you and God bless.