

Ethical Citizens for Minnesota's Future – “A Call to Action”

Hank Shea

December 1, 2009

Oak Ridge Conference Center

Chaska, MN

Good morning. I want to begin my remarks, entitled “A Call to Action”, by asking a series of questions.

The first key question: *Why are we here?* We are here for several reasons—because we care about our state's future, because in the eyes of many our state and nation face daunting challenges approaching crisis proportions, and because we cannot wait for others to find solutions.

The second key question: *What is the greatest challenge facing our nation, our state, and our communities?* Some would say fixing our economic problems. This would include addressing the rising unemployment, budget deficits, and mortgage and lending issues.

But I believe we face a greater challenge. Let me ask you the same question that I have asked audiences around the country this past fall in New England, New York, and Texas. *Which is the greater challenge facing our nation's future, fixing our economic problems, or creating ethical citizens and leaders?* (Only a handful of people raised their hand for the first challenge.) I have seen the same result everywhere, with almost everyone choosing the second challenge. Some people feel this is an unfair question, and I tend to agree. Why? Because these two challenges are so interrelated. My view is that our current economic difficulties, this nation's economic crisis, have been caused by illegal conduct by some, unethical conduct by more, and a lack of character and ethical leadership by too many. Not just on Wall Street or in Washington, D.C., but everywhere in this country—in our businesses, schools, and communities.

If you want proof, just look at statistics that should concern everyone here. You probably have seen the Josephson Institute's survey results before today in its Biannual Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth. In its 2008 survey of almost 30,000 high school students, 42% reported lying to save money, 64% admitted cheating in school, and 30% confessed to stealing from a store, all during the prior year. The scary part, however, is when at the end of the survey, how many students acknowledged lying on the survey itself. Twenty-six percent admitted lying, which according to the experts means they underreported their involvement in lying, cheating or stealing, so the real statistics are actually worse. The most troubling part is how many of these students said at the end of the survey that they are satisfied with their own ethics and character—93%.

This is not just a high school problem. These unethical behaviors continue as students progress in their higher education and their professions. Cheating teens tend to become dishonest adults. Let me point to three types of proof for you to consider. First, in a 2006 survey of 5,000 graduate students, mostly MBA's, 56% reported cheating in the prior year. (McCabe Butterfield and Trevino). Of law students surveyed at the same time, 45% admitted to cheating. (US News and World Report, Oct. 2, 2008).

Second, on October 29, 2009, the Josephson Institute released its first ever large-scale study of the relationship between high school attitudes and behavior and later adult conduct. They surveyed almost 7,000 respondents across five age groups, from teens to post 50 years old. The study found that age does matter. Compared to older adults, teens and young adults are far more likely to lie and cheat and tend to believe doing so is necessary to succeed. In fact, teens are five times more likely to engage in such conduct than adults over the age of 50. The study additionally reported that people who cheat in high school are two to three times more likely to be dishonest later in life, three times more likely to lie to a customer or inflate an insurance claim, and two times more likely to inflate an expense claim or lie or deceive a boss.

Third and finally, my twenty years as a federal prosecutor tell me that unethical behavior breeds criminal conduct. This can range from ponzi schemes to tax fraud to embezzlements to street crimes. I prosecuted many hundreds of white collar criminals and very few woke up thinking that they would commit a federal crime that day. Instead, their crimes almost always started with unethical compromises.

But it is not just lying and cheating that we should be concerned about. Unethical behavior comes in many shapes and sizes. *Do you know how many school children in this nation stay home on the average day out of fear of being bullied or harassed at school?* The National Education Association estimates 160,000. Hitting closer to home, a 2007 Minnesota student survey confirmed that: bullying and harassment occurs frequently in our state. For example, 25% of 5th graders reported having been threatened at school and one third reported they had been kicked, bit or hit; 36% of 9th grade females were recipients of unwanted sexual jokes, gestures or comments; 33% of 12th graders admitted to consuming five or more alcoholic drinks on one occasion in the prior two weeks; and 43% of 12th graders agreed to ride in a car with a friend who had been drinking or using drugs.

Enough statistics—it is clear that much work needs to be done. Tonight, our President is going to tell us about the huge challenges that our country faces in Afghanistan and surrounding countries in our ongoing war against terrorism. But our nation faces another battle that we need to fight and win. Each one of you is a General. That battle is over the core values of our citizens, their character, integrity, and courage. In other words, we are in a battle over the hearts and minds of our children and our grandchildren. This battleground is as important as any location in Afghanistan. The enemies of dishonesty, greed, and unethical behavior are just as dangerous for our future as H1N1 or any other disease. The time to act is now. The challenge to create ethical citizens and leaders requires all hands on deck.

So the final key question: *Are you, are all of us, ready to answer this forum's call to action?* I know some of you and know many of the organizations to which you belong; your track records speak for themselves. You represent our best hope for change, progress and success in creating ethical citizens for our future. So I trust and pray that, by your presence here today, your answer is yes, we are ready to step forward and work together to foster ethical citizenship throughout Minnesota and beyond.

I look forward to joining this collective effort, which will start today and continue for as long as your commitment remains. Thank you.

Copyright, 2009.