Use it, or lose it

“Not everyone thinks they are cut out for political involvement.” That’s the opening line of a box in this month’s cover story (p. 30). It’s true enough as far as it goes. Not everyone is cut out for a singing career, either, or for being a Navy Seal. You need to be able to carry a tune for the first, and be able to swim and be willing to fight for the second.

But for many things in life, you don’t really know how suited you are until you’ve tried them. Sort of like trying your first egg cream or fried squid.

Political involvement, fortunately, does not require singing or swimming—well, not usually (although it often does include eating). Nor does it require running for office, great oratorical skills, or supporting something you don’t believe in (it is hoped). At it’s most basic, it can be as simple as signing your name to a pre-written email.

And, as the article also says, once people get involved, they find it isn’t that difficult. In fact, it can be enjoyable. (It’s always fun to tell your friends that you shook hands with the Governor and asked her a question—omitting the part, of course, about being nervous). Even if “fun” doesn’t always fit the experience of citizen lobbying, “satisfying” does. The reason for that, according to Kell Kelly, is because you’re making a difference, even if your view doesn’t always or immediately prevail.

Albert “Kell” Kelly, the incoming ABA Chairman, and CEO of Oklahoma’s SpiritBank, grew up in a family for whom civic involvement was as much a part of their lives as raising cattle or running a bank. Not everyone has had that background, but Kelly never tires of encouraging people from all walks to be good citizens. He tells them that everyone has the power to help shape good government. Not only by voting, but by actively supporting or opposing issues that matter to them.

For bank employees, the many legislative and regulatory proposals that affect the industry should matter a great deal, not only because their job is affected by them (see the lead item in Bank Notes, p. 12), but because of the impact on banks’ ability to serve their communities.

During our interview with him, Kelly emphasized not taking things for granted. We all tend to do that, particularly the good things, like a strong economy, reasonable regulations, good health, freedom, or even a friendship.

To not take something for granted requires two things: 1. an awareness that it can be taken away, and 2. the interest and effort to sustain it. That’s as true whether the subject be good government or the success of a business. To have a good and fair government, you must continually work at it—specifically, in the case of bankers, working on issues that impact how—and sometimes if—they conduct business.

As Kelly says, “The worst thing to lose is the belief that you can make a difference.” He hasn’t lost that belief and does all he can to rekindle it in those who have. That guiding principle motivates him and makes him, truly, an activist banker. •

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