

Thursday, October 2, 2008

"I want to refer to non-Latino Spanish-speaking lawyers."

Reality so often is more pathetic than fiction. Yesterday, I was talking with a woman on the way down the courthouse elevator. She works in the courthouse, and we spoke in Spanish, her native tongue; I do not have as much of a throughout-the-day chance to speak Spanish now that I am no longer with my former law partner, whose Spanish is impeccable and whose practice heavily involves the language. This woman said she was happy to meet an additional Spanish-speaking lawyer (my Spanish is intermediate, bolstered by a quarter century of practice), because some people sometimes ask her for names of such lawyers. Then came the often uncomfortable question: "Where are you from?" Some just want to know where I grew up. Others actually want to know my ethnic and/or religious background. Once when asked that question, the follow-up was: "Are you American or Jewish?" as if the two are mutually exclusive. The questioner had sold me a bottle of water at a New Orleans airport newsstand, pre-Katrina, and I stormed out labeling her out loud "Stupid! Stupid!", which was hardly in sync with my goal of a t'ai chi life twenty-four hours a day. To this woman on the elevator, I answered "Connecticut, and now in the Washington area a long time." She replied: "So, you are not born abroad?" JK: "That's right." She responded: "Good. I don't want to refer people to lawyers from Latin America [yet she was born a Spanish speaker]. They take advantage of their own." JK: "I've heard enough. Your words make no sense. Have a nice day." (Moreover, who can speak Spanish better than a native-born Spanish speaker?) Sadly, bigotry remains alive and thriving among too many people, even sometimes by people against their own ethnic group. Perhaps more sadly, too many people do not stand up to such attitudes. What to do about it? When many years ago I complained to a very selfless and capable public interest lawyer/leader/giant about ongoing rampant bigotry, he replied: "That is why we pursue housing discrimination and employment discrimination lawsuits." However, successful discrimination lawsuits alone will not solve the problem. People who express bigoted attitudes need to be addressed one-by-one, if they have the capacity to listen to reasoning. Addressing bigots can make waves. Make waves if that is the only way to address them. Do not just sit safely in the middle of a boat hoping it does not rock, only to hit a huge rock that tears apart your boat and sinks it anyway. How do you handle such situations? Jon Katz.

Posted by Jon Katz in Jon's news & views at 00:00

Seems as though you're very quick to judge. Some people who say things like she said to you are talking from an experiential background you can't know. That doesn't make her perspective correct. Rather than storming off, why not ask her why she said that. Perhaps in the abstract she hold that opinion, which you term bigoted. Maybe in talking with you about her experiences, you could show her that her generalizations are not supported. That would seem to be the more Zen approach.

Anonymous on Oct 3 2008, 16:29

Jon,

Sadly but true many people take advantage of their own. When I was a younger I remember discussing fees with a Latino Attorney I was looking to hire and when I was going over the retainer his contingent fee was the standard third, but his Spanish retainer agreement was set at forty.

I asked him why it was more for our own people and he replied, "Its a fee for translation costs." However we are not the only culprits, this was a standard practice I have found among many of Spanish speaking service providers.

Courts abuse us because we don't know any better. Not that we are simpleminded, but because where my family came from, there was no enforcement of law, their was no regulation of government.

So when my people come here and get profiled by the police, neglected by the State and have an option of paying a mono lingual English speaking attorney who is going to half ass my case or hire a bi lingual attorney who is shafting me because there is no one else to go to, we usually will take the shaft because we can at least understand the person giving it to us.

And this is part of the reason I stay in Mississippi...

rem
>;o)

Anonymous on Oct 4 2008, 14:02

Thanks, RG and Remy for your comments-

RG- My posting already acknowledges that my storming out of the airport store in 2000 was not in sync with my t'ai chi life. As to the courthouse employee's comment last week out in the open on the first floor of the courthouse, I was stunned and irritated by her comment (and that she would say this for anybody passing to hear), and she had to be on her way. There was no opportunity for further discussion, and I will see what happens if there is such opportunity in the future.

Remy- Are you saying you stay in Mississippi to be the proverbial preacher among the heathen, because you think the place has reversed its reputation from the 1960's of being a violently and virulently racist place, because you jest, or because of other reasons?

Thanks, both, for commenting. Jon
Anonymous on Oct 5 2008, 08:00