

Take Back the Torch

By Elyse Cherry '83

IN 1983, AS THE NORTHEASTERN LAW STUDENT commencement speaker, I challenged my classmates to use our legal education to help create the world we want — an equitable world in which equality is a given, not a goal. Decades of struggle, notwithstanding, the goal has not changed; but the world and the strategies that lead to success have.

In my view, our democratic institutions rest on two key pillars: a broadly held belief in the legitimacy of elections, and the commitment of our armed forces to support and defend the Constitution. Despite extraordinary pressure on its leadership, the military continues to uphold its oath. Legal advocates and the courts have done an excellent job rejecting unwarranted electoral challenges. But substantial and increasing numbers of Americans now question the validity of elections. The damage to “hearts and minds” is significant. Democracy is under attack.

How do we recapture those wavering hearts and minds? Surely, not by fighting with each other. When each constituent group fights for their own piece of the pie, rather than for a larger pie, we all end up with less.

In our long struggle for marriage equality for same-sex couples, LGBTQ advocacy groups first led with messaging about rights and benefits. Not until we put ourselves into the shoes of the people who were indifferent or hostile to our cause did we find a message that spoke more broadly: “love is love.” While Black Lives Matter, Stop Asian Hate, the ADL, GLAD and similar advocacy groups have highlighted the critical issues of injustice, inequity and intolerance, I believe we need to band together with a new unifying message for today’s challenges. I propose we “Take Back the Torch.”

BlueHub Capital, the national nonprofit community finance organization that I’ve had the honor to lead for the past 25 years, just launched a new nonprofit initiative — One Percent for America — that works to

unify Americans and future citizens by creating affordable, accessible pathways to US citizenship through low-interest loans, free financial education and passionate community engagement.

We’ve built One Percent for America’s logo on Lady Liberty — holding her torch and lighting the way for immigrants coming to the United States. While today we associate the Statue of Liberty with immigration and the journey to America, the original intention of the gift from France was to commemorate the perseverance of freedom and democracy after the American Civil War. The statue was meant to stand above political turmoil and party factions and to shine as an international symbol of liberty, justice and democracy.

Let’s revive Lady Liberty and her enlightening torch to unify all who believe in an inclusive future. Take Back the Torch — tiki or otherwise — from those who wish to hate and divide and let its glow, once again, light our path toward unity, equality, justice and democracy.

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