Civil, Open Dialogue in the Digital Age

I was recently presented with a lawsuit from a firm in Anchorage representing Bethany Wortham, a constituent in Kenai, for being blocked on my Twitter account. I immediately called our Senate communications staff and asked if anyone was blocked on my account. Remaining on the phone and upon learning that Ms. Wortham was blocked, I directed that she be immediately unblocked. No one is currently blocked on my Twitter account. I also looked over my other social media accounts to ensure that civil Alaskan constituents were not blocked.

I was honestly surprised to receive the lawsuit and learn that anyone was blocked on Twitter. I will be 60 years old this year. This is the first formal lawsuit I have experienced. I am not an active Twitter user (I believe 10 posts have occurred since it was created by staff for me in 2014). However, this lawsuit and the discussions I have had with Ms. Wortham brings up an important issue, which is the intent of her efforts. Elected officials must be willing to listen to their constituents in an open forum. Whether in the town square, or within increasingly digital forums, elected officials must respect and protect the First Amendment right to free speech when constituents comment with a civil and respectful opposing viewpoint.

Although I have deleted a few uncivil comments and requested that a few individuals be blocked from Facebook, nearly all of those constituent issues have been resolved via telephone and/or face-to-face through civil discussions and requests to be unblocked. In the rare case when threats were received where the Alaska State Troopers have been notified, those two individuals have remained blocked. I am unaware of anyone being blocked on my other than Twitter social media that have not fallen into the "uncivil" categories, however I also request that anyone ever finding themselves blocked from any of my accounts reach out to me directly at 907-283-7996 so that the condition can also be immediately corrected if they find themselves mistakenly, or if in their opinion, unfairly blocked. I am always willing to discuss a better option.

So, after taking the time to understand Ms. Wortham's goals, I have to say that I wholeheartedly agree with her. Ms. Wortham is fighting for her rights and as an example for her children. She wants them to know that they have the right to be heard by their elected officials through whichever forum may be provided by the official. Although I openly admit to not being particularly tech savvy, especially with Twitter, the buck stops here on any account that bears my name. Although I may not know exactly how it occurred, I take full responsibility for Ms. Wortham being inadvertently blocked and I apologize for that occurrence.

I believe in open communication with my constituents and hope to serve as an example for others that may feel that silencing disagreement is acceptable. It isn't. The best answer is discovered by listening to the spectrum of viewpoints of a given constituent group, whether that group is a family, a community, a Senate district or statewide. This post is a call to others that have been entrusted to represent constituent groups to be open to respectful opposing viewpoints. You may actually learn something that helps you to better represent your constituents.

This is my guarantee to Ms. Wortham and all other constituents. I will not block you if you engage respectfully. I will make a concerted effort in the future to periodically review my social media accounts to ensure that staff has not inadvertently blocked you either. Constituents will always have access, unless they choose to give up that right through uncivil posts or comments, such as personal attacks, continuous or obscene uncivil comments, threats, unsubstantiated criminal accusations, comments or posts that include inappropriate sexual content, fake pages, or attempting to sell products on or through my social media accounts.

However, the social media responsibility is a two-way street. Although Ms. Wortham has never been uncivil, she acknowledges that what can be allowed in the online town square must have limitations on uncivil behavior. I have blocked very few individuals through the years on Facebook for behaviors above,

including those that have been reported to the Alaska State Troopers for graphic personal threats. For the online town hall to function effectively, behavior must mirror behavior we should all expect to experience in person. The responsibility lies with all of us. Social media has become acidic, disrespectful, and negatively aggressive. For this experiment to work, we must all be respectful and positively open to the viewpoints of others.

In conclusion, although I have never blocked a constituent for simply disagreeing with me, I take full responsibility for Ms. Wortham being blocked from my Twitter account and will ensure a process that grants free access to civil constituents in the future. I also hope this is considered by other elected officials that regularly delete comments and block constituents simply over a difference of opinion. There is a better way to improve the social media outcome by respectfully working together for a set of acceptable engagement expectations. We can expect the occurrence of online town hall conversations to increase as time goes on. As we do in person, we share the responsibility for the outcome to be fruitful for the betterment of our communities and Alaska.

I actively support and will defend the First Amendment right to free speech and civil discussion. Agreeing with me, my opinions or my decisions has never been a requirement for my constituents to engage. Whether the public forum is at a town hall or virtual, I will always defend my constituent's rights to comment, and respectfully disagree with me freely. If you feel otherwise, call me. Respectful, mature adults most always work it out and I am always willing to give it my best effort to do so as your elected official.

Thank you - Peter