

Advocacy in even more “interesting” times

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True, effective advocacy is ongoing, locally-based, and comes from the heart. I came across this sentence this morning while I was working on details for our state advocacy day, coming up on March 9. It’s one that I’ve used for almost twenty years for teaching, describing, and promoting the idea that advocacy is all about human connection and focusing on what really matters. Right now, the need to connect and to understand each other seems more important than ever, and is so much more complicated than ever.

Politics, advocacy, and civic discourse on the national level has become more complicated than we could have imagined. In Wisconsin, we have experience with this complicated landscape. The Wisconsin State Legislature is tilted Republican and conservative. Ok, it’s not “tilted,” it’s predominantly Republican and conservative. I’ll focus on one State Senator from northern Wisconsin. Let’s call him John Smith. Sen. Smith is from a small town in a beautiful area rich with natural resources, the extracting of which through logging and mining provided good-paying jobs for generations. Tourism and summer cabin ownership has long been another major economic driver in the area and is growing in importance. The arts and creativity are inherent in this region – tourists and summer residents like to visit galleries, attend outdoor concerts, send their kids to art camp. Artists can live more cheaply and have a better quality of life there than in the big city, so there’s an active community of creative people who choose this area as their home.

Sen. Smith is known for his harsh stance on environmental issues. In recent years, he led a contentious, emotional, and partisan process to develop what would have been the world’s largest taconite ore mine in an area sacred to the Bad River Tribes. This mine would have violated a tribal treaty negotiated in 1854 and destroyed the pristine landscape in that region. (After several years of a horrible process, the mine is a dead issue, although you never know if it might come back.)

He’s also a very pleasant man, easy to talk to, and he’s very smart. He shakes my hand enthusiastically when I see him. He shows up at arts meetings and discussions in his district; he even attended a recent fundraiser for Arts Wisconsin. His children are very involved in the arts. He’s a member of the Joint Finance Committee and told me proudly at a hearing last year that he was a big arts supporter who would be happy to vote for our legislation calling for more investment in Wisconsin’s creative economy.

Now, I'm not fooling myself. It's easy for Sen. Smith to support the arts. Most of his constituents don't have an opinion about the issue, so it's a political win achieved without much effort, unlike the mine. But to his credit, he sees that his district is a place of opportunity. He knows that entrepreneurialism and quality of life are key issues and part of the solution to get people to live, work and play in his district. I honor and appreciate his support on this issue, even though I disagree with him on almost everything else.

It feels like advocacy is more complicated than ever, because the world is more complicated than ever. I'm going to keep my focus on service, passion, working from the ground up, and finding common ground, because that's what really matters.