

SNG-Edgar Fellows-9-11-17

Edgar Fellows combat toxicity in Illinois politics

By Jim Nowlan

Former Illinois governor Jim Edgar (1991-98) has developed a bipartisan program for up-and-coming leaders in our state. It has the potential to take our politics from the gutter up toward constructive, problem-solving give and take.

The recent concord on state school funding, for example, a topic riven for years by regional and partisan rancor, may have resulted, in good part anyway, from bonds forged earlier in the Edgar Fellows Program.

Every summer since 2012, Edgar has gathered a new crop of 40 young mayors, fresh-faced state lawmakers and others for an intensive week-long crash course on how to get along and think about how to make Illinois better.

[Leadership programs, all valuable, are today so-everywhere. Yet, the Edgar Fellows Program is different, really different.]

“I wanted something that was diverse, bipartisan and drew people who were already committed and successfully involved in government and politics,” the moderate, one-time GOP governor told me recently. “People who are likely to make it big in Illinois.”

In a state where regional, partisan and economic differences are often razor sharp, Edgar’s focus is on getting people to work together.

“A lot of Chicagoans have never been south of I-80 (where three-quarters of Illinois lies),” Edgar, a downstate native, observes.

He recalls one Democratic city official exclaiming, only half in jest: “This is where I met my first Republican, and they’re not all bad.”

Edgar runs the program and is there for every minute of it. The Fellows are hosted at a University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign retreat setting, but the program relies on private fundraising to cover most of the \$350,000 a year cost.

Forty Fellows are selected each year by an advisory committee for this by-nomination-only program. Readers of this column can nominate a local official, civic or business leader you think has the right stuff; send your nominations to [sgrace@uillinois.edu](mailto:sgrace@uillinois.edu).

Geographic and partisan balance are critical. Not every deserving nominee gets in. Some make it the second year.

The program has only been operating since 2012, yet already 52 Fellows are in or have made it to the state legislature (out of a total of 177 members in the House and Senate).

“My goal is that someday a Chicago mayor and Illinois governor will have met earlier, and bonded, as Fellows,” Edgar says.

That day may not be far off. Three Fellows are running for governor next year, another is Cook County State’s Attorney and one is now in Congress.

Edgar says a key to success of the program has been a rich mix of sessions during a week jam-packed with substantive issues like infrastructure and health care; process, as in labor negotiating, and of course leadership skill development.

Although based at a major university, over the years the speaker roster has shifted largely from academics—“often too pedantic,” Edgar says—to practical experience and lessons learned from top political, civic and business leaders.

Fellows are always riveted, for example, when regular guest and former Obama chief of staff Bill Daley tells of his night in the White House situation room when the U.S. took out Osama bin Laden.

A teetotaler, Edgar is nevertheless struck by the value to the bonding process when Fellows might slip away from their isolated retreat setting after a 14-hour day to hoist a few brews at a campus bar.

Back to school funding.

Small-town Democratic state senator Andy Manar, conservative downstate GOP senator Jason Barickman and Chicago Democratic, African-American state rep Christian Mitchell are all Edgar alums.

These three have also become leading students of our complex school funding. The trio were the keys to making the ground-breaking new school funding package reality.

“During the recent, intense tussle over school funding,” Barickman notes, “Christian, Andy and I debated and argued with one another publicly about school funding, but we did so on the substantive issues, not on the regional and partisan dimensions that often get in the way.”

Edgar wants the 240 Fellows thus far to keep building on connections forged at the U. of I., yet he hasn’t come up with a sure-shot way to do so.

“Alumni” are invited a couple of times a year to activities in Chicago and Springfield, but attendance has been spottier than he had hoped. “These are busy, ambitious people,” Edgar notes.

It’s way too early to tell, and the centripetal forces that draw Illinois politicians into their own, narrow partisan and regional worlds are strong.

Even so, observers like Edgar as well as many Fellows I have talked with are rather amazed at how compelling the bonds forged via the Edgar Fellows Program have become.

[Let’s hope the better angels of our nature play out from this program and contribute to transforming the way politics is done in Illinois. We could sure use it.]