Hi! I’m Dick Pantages, and I have the pleasure of representing you and the environmental health profession as the president of NEHA for the next year.

Who Is He?
I graduated from college, knew I wasn’t going to get drafted, and hadn’t been accepted for medical school. My dad cut a job announcement out of the local paper for a “sanitarian” with the local county health department. I wasn’t entirely sure what that was, but I applied. I researched the job (no Google in those days!) and took the exam. One of the panel members on the oral part of the exam was Stu Richardson, Sr., and he went back to the neighboring county (Alameda County, California) and suggested that they hire me. I started as a “sanitarian trainee.” I thought I’d spend a year and get registered, and then I would have that registration to fall back on in case I needed a job in the future. A year later I took the California exam, became a registered sanitarian, and joined NEHA. After about five years, I left the county to work for the County Employees’ Association. After a year and a half of that, I decided that wasn’t a good career choice, so I reinstated with the county and spent another 30 years with them.

During that time, I had the opportunity to do a lot of interesting things: supervise an exhumation at midnight under a full moon; rub elbows with some famous inmates in the detention facilities in Alameda County; oversee the installation of the first integrated data management system we had ever had; attend (on duty, of course) the infamous Altamont rock concert in December 1969; and spend about $5 million developing a state-of-the-art household and conditionally exempt hazardous waste collection program, with three facilities throughout the county.

I have also had the chance to see environmental health in the Soviet Union and Russia (the 1991 “revolution” occurred during our visit there!) through my involvement with the California Environmental Health Association (the original CEHA!).

I came into the profession when one was expected to join professional organizations, and so I did. In 1974, I attended my first NEHA Annual Educational Conference (AEC) in Cincinnati, Ohio, and last month I attended my 34th AEC & Exhibition in Tucson. At that first AEC, I got enough information to be able to return and revise our county’s private sewage disposal procedures. I realized that a lot of information was available at the AECs, and I could make a lot of contacts, too. Sometimes valuable information comes from a casual conversation in the hallway or over a meal with colleagues.

I also quickly learned the importance of “sanitation,” as it was called then, and “environmental health,” as it is called now. The prevention of disease and the preservation of healthy conditions are a much more cost-effective means of protecting the public than expensive remediation after the fact. I realized that most of the advancement in public health and the increasing life span of our residents was due to the efforts of “registered sanitarians.” I was hooked and remained with Alameda County until I retired.

One of my friends and colleagues, Diane Evans, was a regional vice president (RVP) on the NEHA board of directors. When she decided to run for second vice president, she encouraged me to run for the RVP position that she was vacating. I became the RVP for Region 2 in 1991 and have been on the NEHA board ever since.

You might ask why someone who is retired would be interested in being the president of NEHA. The main reason is that I have the time to devote to it now, and I’m looking forward to this next year.

What is He Doing Here?
I’d like to help with several things over the course of the next year. I realize that one year is not likely to be enough time to achieve finality on many items, but I’d like to continue, or start, several things.

First, I’d like to continue with past president Rob Blake’s efforts at marketing “the invisible profession.” Environmental health is not well known either by the public or the legislators (whether they’re at the city, county, state, or federal level) that approve and control our budgets. Part of the problem stems from the fact that we, as individual environmental health professionals, don’t toot our own horns. Another part of the problem is that we, as a professional

If you want something talked about, go to organization X, but if you want something done, go to NEHA.
President's Message continued from page 4

association, don’t toot our own horns. Unfortunately, we’re most likely to get publicity when something goes wrong—a foodborne illness, for example. When we do things right, which is most of the time, nothing happens, and we get no notice.

As a part of marketing the invisible profession, I want to see NEHA take a more proactive stand in tooting our horn for the many accomplishments that we have made in the 17 years that I have been on the board. NEHA is no longer relegated to going, hat in hand, knocking on doors of organizations, governmental and nongovernmental, to see if they will meet with us. These organizations are now knocking on NEHA’s door! If you want something talked about, go to organization X, but if you want something done, go to NEHA,” is what we are hearing now!

Second, it seems clear that accreditation of public health and environmental health departments is on the near horizon, and I want to see that NEHA is positioned to be a key player in that effort. No one knows environmental health as well as NEHA, and we will be involved with setting standards for accreditation for environmental health.

TCHD’s goal is to continually improve its Land Use Program in terms of the quality of its interventions and relationships and its capacity to offer a more comprehensive program. It does this partly by networking with other LPHAs and monitoring best practices nationally. TCHD’s methodical process of expanding its scope and collaboration around how the built environment can impact health has been a necessary component of advancing public health through the built environment.

Acknowledgements: Thanks to Nadejda Mishkovsky from International City/County Management Association (ICMA) and Andrew Dannenberg from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention National Center for Environmental Health (CDC/NCEH) for reviewing this document. Thanks also to Susan Jerles from NEHA for coordinating efforts throughout this process to complete this article.

Corresponding Author: Carol MacLennan, Senior Environmental Health Policy Coordinator, Tri-County Health Department, 7000 E. Belleview Ave. Ste. 301, Greenwood Village, Colorado 80111. E-mail: cmaclenn@tchd.org.

Karen Roof has a consulting business and is faculty at the University of Colorado Denver. E-mail: Karen.Roof@ucdenver.edu.

REFERENCES


Congratulations on 25 Years of Outstanding Service!

At the AEC & Exhibition in Tucson, Nelson Fabian was honored for his 25 years of outstanding service as executive director of NEHA. Nelson is responsible for the day-to-day operations of NEHA. He hires the staff. The board gives Nelson general guidance and leaves it to Nelson to get the job done. I’ve known Nelson since he was hired. You could not ask for a more dedicated person or a better representative of NEHA. That dedication and professionalism extends to all the staff that Nelson is responsible for hiring and mentoring and coaching.

There was a time, during my tenure on the board, when we were ready to make plans to cut back to the bare essentials, because we were just about broke. We now have a surplus enough to carry us for more than four months, which is exceptional for nonprofit organizations.

Congratulations and thank you, Nelson! Well, that’s probably more than you wanted to know, but as you can tell, I’m bullish on NEHA. Let me know if there are things you would like me to talk about in this column over the next year, and I’ll do my best to accommodate you. Thanks for your support in the coming year.