I n my October column I stated, “Your success is contingent upon your ability to interact and relate to others.” I further mused that “success comes not only with whom you know, but also, with who knows you!” I believe there is no better opportunity for environmental health professionals to advance this “get connected, stay connected” agenda than by attending the NEHA Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition.

As environmental health professionals we are expected to competently and scientifically anticipate, recognize, evaluate, and mitigate risks that pose threats to humans and the environment. (Wow—that could be a new definition for environmental health!) NEHA’s AEC is a unique opportunity for you to gain the skills, expertise, and insights needed to solve these challenges. NEHA’s AEC is also the most concentrated, value-driven training and educational investment your organization can make. The real return on investment, though, comes with your investment in you! It’s what you make of it!

This year’s AEC at the Hyatt Regency Crystal City (at a great room rate for the Washington, DC, area!) is an excellent opportunity for you to connect vertically and horizontally with 1,000+ like-minded practitioners, students, academics, policy makers, and environmental health professionals. The key here is to engage a tool in which all of us have capacity, but few actually optimize: person-to-person (P2P) communication.

NEHA’s 77th AEC (AEC #77) will afford you the opportunity to establish connections, to reconnect with previous acquaintances, and to build P2P relationships and networks with contemporary professionals who can not only help you to build and sustain a career but also help you to succeed in your career.

At the conference and in addition to the DC-area venue, which is an educational opportunity in itself, you will have access to relevant people addressing timely topics related to policy development, facilitation, and implementation with the bonus of finding out with whom to talk and when. Sessions will address environmental justice, hazardous materials, leadership, sustainability, water quality, onsite wastewater, and children’s environmental health. Other presentations will cover air quality, food protection and defense, healthy homes and communities, land use and design, vector control and zoonotic disease, recreational water, technology, and international environmental health. You truly have the ability to create a point-of-contact for practically every environmental health challenge you may encounter if you engage!

And if that isn’t enough, Dr. Graham Allison, our keynote speaker, will address apocalyptic decision making as it relates to the environment and quite literally the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in his keynote, “What do the Cuban missile crisis and environmental health have in common?”

This conference will be special to me for many reasons. One of those reasons is that my wife and daughter will be able to attend briefly. This will be my wife’s first conference. More important than that, it will be special because she managed to put up with me this year while managing her career and everything else in our lives. She’ll get a glimpse of what we do and why we do it! I think too of the education my daughter will get just visiting iconic DC venues such as the memorials, the Smithsonian, and the White House! I did not have that opportunity until I was well into my adult years! Nelson promises I’ll have a pretty cool room and I am jazzed about that but I am most excited about learning something new and connecting with you! At the conference end, it will be bittersweet as I pass the gavel of the presidency to President Elect Alicia Enriquez Collins (no relation), whom I expect will keep the passion and energy for NEHA and what we do burning bright!

…And by the way, if for some reason you cannot make the AEC, NEHA has provided a tool by which you can attend “virtually.” Learn how to access the Virtual AEC for sessions, networking, and real-time feedback by going to neha2013aec.org/virtual_experience.html.

Perhaps you can tell, I am very excited about our conference this year and I hope to C U P2P @ AEC #77!