The Swan Song

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The phrase “swan song” is an idea from antiquity that at the end of its life, the swan sings one final beautiful song. It is first discussed in ancient Greek literature. In Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice, Portia exclaims, “Let music sound while he doth make his choice; then, if he loses, he makes a swan-like end, fading in music. . . .” By extension, “swan song” has become an idiom referring to a final theatrical or dramatic appearance, or any final work or accomplishment. It generally carries the connotation that the performer is aware that this is the last performance and is expending everything in one magnificent final effort. So here goes. . . .

This is my last president’s column as I turn over the NEHA gavel on June 20, 2011, to our incoming president, Mel Knight of Sacramento. The year I served as your president was fulfilling to me as a capstone to my environmental health career, which I was proud to accomplish largely in Michigan and Ohio. I served as an affiliate president 10 years ago in the Michigan Environmental Health Association and that experience helped me as I moved through the three annual NEHA executive chairs that lead to the presidency. The years I served as second vice president, first vice president, and president elect were truly the apprenticeship one needs to become completely familiar with the complex nature of NEHA and how everything works. This year, the penultimate year of my board of directors service, was truly amazing and I shall always cherish the experience. It wasn’t all smooth sailing. There were some downsides and disappointments during my term. But far, far, and away it has been an absolute enjoyment to head up the national professional organization of environmental health practitioners across our great county. I have been very proud to serve as your president and I must thank you—our vast membership—for that honor.

My year in review begins with Dr. Welford Roberts’s passing of the NEHA gavel to me in Albuquerque. As I stepped to the podium to deliver my presidential address, I wanted to scream, “Be still, my beating heart!” I was nervous, to be sure. And I was sick. My voice had totally gone by the time my wife Peggy had arrived the day before the banquet. I spent that day, and the afternoon of the next, gargling salt water and lemon juice. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to deliver my address but somehow I got through it. I discussed the challenges we faced in the wake of the Great Recession and thanked Welford for his leadership. I also thanked our Executive Director Nelson Fabian for his stewardship of NEHA during these tough times. Finally I thanked my boss, Columbus Health Commissioner Dr. Teresa Long, for allowing me the time to dedicate to the five years it takes to serve as a NEHA national officer. I paid homage to my college professor, Dr. Herman Koren, a Mangold Award recipient, and talked about my career in Michigan and Ohio, as well as my family, all in an effort for you, the membership, to get to know me better. I then delved into the environmental crisis of the day: the gulf oil spill. My discussion of that culminated in cutting my gas credit card in two as a symbolic gesture. I caught some flak for that but I’d do it again!

After the Albuquerque AEC, I had a lot of NEHA business to attend to as the summer drew to a close. There was a fresh approach and consolidation to our technical section chair system and the new appointments I made. I worked with our ad hoc committee chaired by RVP Roy Kroeger to develop a position paper on the gulf oil spill. As regional or statewide issues arose, and at the request of our affiliates, I wrote letters of support concerning environmental health issues in California, Iowa, Michigan, New Jersey, and Ohio. I also had deadlines for my 10 Journal of Environmental Health columns, and those weren’t as easy to meet as you might expect.

The travel associated with the NEHA presidency for me was both fun and fulfilling.
The highlight of my journeys was the trip I took with Nelson to Vancouver, British Columbia, to attend the 11th World Congress of the International Federation of Environmental Health in September. I discussed that with you, gentle reader, in the December column. I was also invited to attend and delivered addresses at our affiliate's annual meetings in Kansas, Nebraska, and Texas. I enjoyed those trips immensely because I was able to network with those fine members and met some great individuals. The NEHA presidency does allow one to travel a bit and experience the fellowship that an environmental health career allows with other like-minded professionals in different parts of the country, which is always good.

One of the downsides I mentioned above was facing a health issue that knocked me down from late October through most of November, taking me out of both NEHA and my own work for about four weeks. I’ll spare you the details, but it was a kidney stone situation that required surgery. I bounced back to make the December board of directors’ meeting in early December in Denver. As the winter—and it was a severe one here in the Midwest this year—dragged on and on, the NEHA activities continued and had to be balanced with my day job. Situations arose with some of our affiliates who requested support letters. I weighed in on matters with our upcoming AEC. Preparing for the annual spring board meeting in Fort Collins, Colorado, was also extensive, as it’s a two-day meeting and our largest of the year. I always had telephone calls to make on behalf of NEHA; in short, it was a very busy time for me. I realize I’ve been very lucky to have been able to serve as your NEHA president, shared by only 75 men and women since 1937.

One of the fundamental changes to NEHA’s operation that occurred during my presidency was the change to the way our technical sections work. NEHA has hired a staff member, Shelly Wallingford, who handles the educational content of our AEC with advice and counsel from our technical section chairs, instead of burdening those members who are chairs with that responsibility alone. The development of the Center for Priority-Based Budgeting as a part of NEHA’s Entrepreneurial Zone was also new this year. The format of our AEC has undergone some changes in response to the current economic times. We have also become more engaged in the partnerships we nourish with federal agencies and other professional organizations.

Now, please consider this a “call to service” to you, NEHA member. Leadership is an important attribute and I really don’t believe there are born leaders. It’s a skill that’s acquired and enhanced by experience throughout a career. NEHA will need strong leadership in the decade ahead with the challenges that are primarily associated with our economy and its effect on our profession. The environmental health profession really needs to stake out new frontiers of service to sustain itself, and I don’t see that happening without strong NEHA leadership. It’s taken a lot of work from a lot of different folks to get NEHA where it is today as far as being able to influence national policy and accordingly shape our profession as the single voice we have nationally. The maintenance of that influential position will be a constant challenge. Please consider stepping up to a leadership role in your affiliate or with NEHA itself. It’s a truly rewarding experience in that you will grow and develop in ways you hadn’t imagined. You will broaden your horizons and your universe of colleagues—especially in the national office—will grow to be huge. Those are relationships you will always have into the twilight of your career. More importantly, you will be able to help develop a legacy of what our profession will look like as you wind up your career and pass it down to those who come after us, our current environmental health undergraduates.

After I pass the venerable NEHA gavel to Mel Knight in a couple of weeks, I’ll step into the role of immediate past president. It’s a role considered to be largely advisory, due to the experience afforded while passing through the four chairs. Mel might ask me to spearhead a special project or initiative, but my final year on the NEHA board of directors definitely will be a cooldown for me and I like the sound of that.

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