For my first “President’s Message” as I begin my term leading this outstanding organization, I thought it would be appropriate to introduce myself by sharing my background, what you might expect of my leadership, and NEHA’s course in the coming year. Reviewing the inaugural message from our last four presidents—I’m glad I keep all my old JEHs—I see that they all begin with an introduction that helps give an idea of their philosophy. I think it’s important for you as readers of this monthly column to get to know me. Some of my fellow board members have already taken to calling me the nickname “The” Keith, undoubtedly in reference to “The” university a few miles down the road from my office. I will certainly strive to get to know the members of our professional organization I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting and to take to heart all of your comments and suggestions for the advancement of NEHA.

I’m totally a Midwestern guy, born and raised in Marion, Indiana. My dad was a police officer, my mom a homemaker. My undergraduate degree in environmental health was conferred at Indiana State University in Terre Haute. I graduated the year before Larry Bird was a redshirted freshman and, by the way, I’m a huge college basketball fan. My professor and mentor at ISU was Dr. Hank Koren, whom I am indebted to for the mentoring and personal attention I received—but more on mentoring in a later column. My presidential predecessor, Welford Roberts, covered that topic extensively in last April’s JEH. Speaking of Welford, I’d like to express my gratitude to him for leading NEHA for the preceding year, during the particularly gloomy Great Recession from which we are just emerging. The economy has been particularly devastating to public employees, a category to which the majority of our members belong, but again, that is a topic for another issue.

Back in the day, Dr. Koren required his students to complete two environmental health internships. Not a bad requirement, given the amount of hands-on experience we gained and the opportunity to apply what we had learned from our classes. I was extremely fortunate in my internship experiences. I was assigned first to Environmental Health Services of the Oakland County Health Division in Pontiac, Michigan. My second experience was with the Chester County Health Department in West Chester, Pennsylvania. My boss there was none other than V. Harry Adrounie, who I later realized was an icon in the environmental health world. As a 22-year-old kid, I had no inkling of that, but was impressed by his kindness and interest in my career, and again, that word mentoring comes to mind. His recent passing was a great loss to the environmental health community.

Upon graduation, my desire was to return to Michigan. Oakland County was a very progressive, large department and I felt comfortable there—but alas, they had no openings. Timing is everything. My first full-time environmental health position as a sanitarian-in-training was with the Effingham County Health Department in Illinois. It was a great experience, especially since I was the only sanitarian for the entire county. It was definitely a trial by fire, but I value that experience greatly as it taught me to “man up” and take charge of my new work life. I was directed by the board of health to write a new countywide food code. I even discussed it live on Effingham’s single radio station’s talk show. It was pretty heady stuff for someone just out of college. Although I was only there seven months, I was strengthened by the experience of being on my own, totally reliant on my own devices. In April of 1975, Oakland County had a sanitarian position for me. I was excited to begin master’s level courses at the University of Michigan and to
move to the Detroit suburbs as I launched
the next stage of my career. To make a long
story short, I stayed at the Oakland County
Health Division for 28 years! I was promoted
through the ranks and eventually became
chief of Environmental Health Field Activi-
ties under another former NEHA president,
Ron Grimes, who was the EH director then.
During my tenure, I was able to complete the
first half of my master’s degree at the U-M
and finish at Central Michigan University in
1983. The lion’s share of my EH experience
and a vast array of personal and professional
relationships stem from my time in Michigan.
While in the Great Lakes State, I also had the
honor of serving as president of the Michigan
Environmental Health Association in 2001.

The latest chapter of my professional ca-
reer began when I took an early retirement
buy-out proposal from Oakland County that
was being offered to senior employees, land-
ing in Columbus, Ohio, as the new environ-
mental health administrator of Columbus
Public Health. Except for those awkward
introductory issues that had a nexus in that
Buckeye-Wolverine thing, it’s been a good fit
for me and I love my new community. Folks
in my subdivision paint that big red “O” on
their garage doors and fly the Buckeye flag
in their front yards. My staff inspects all the
food vendors at the ‘Shoe, OSU’s venerable
football stadium. My eldest daughter is even
a proud Buckeye as a senior in the College of
Nursing. The environmental health divi-
sion has embraced me and we work very
well together—as a team. We were tremen-
dously proud when Columbus Public Health
was recognized as the 2009 recipient of the
Samuel J. Crumbine Award. My staff is ex-
tremely professional and I must give them
credit; much of my success in Columbus I
de owe to them. A great EH staff can only make
their director look good! Finally, I’d like to
share that I’ve been married for 23 years to
my wife, Peggy. We first met at the Oakland
County employee’s Christmas party and I
asked her to dance. She said no. I persevered
and we were married a year later. We have
two daughters, Cassie and Ashleigh. Did I
mention the drama at my house? I love fly-
fishing and I still have a cottage on northern
Michigan’s Au Sable River. The best fish I
ever caught was a 33-inch steelhead, caught
on an egg-sac fly in Michigan’s Pere Mar-
quette River.

I’m sure, gentle reader, you are beginning
to feel like these are the lyrics from the Toby
Keith hit, “I Want to Talk About Me,” and in
fact I feel your pain. So let’s talk about you—
you and NEHA. The near future will be an
exciting period for NEHA. So much is hap-
pening! As of late, NEHA has been at the na-
tional table much more than in the past and
has gained stature from the exposure. We
have been entrusted with grant awards from
the Centers for Disease Control and Preven-
tion to the tune of some $5 million to develop
and conduct a multitude of programs for the
advancement of environmental health across
the nation. A great example of that effort is
the revitalized Epi-Ready training, which
trained over 400 sanitarians, nurses, and epi-
demiologists at state and local health depart-
ments in 2009 and over 250 so far this year.
We are also recipients of grant funds from
a number of other federal agencies and pri-
ivate sector sources. Current First Vice Presi-
dent Brian Collins and RVP Bob Custard are
representing NEHA in the new federal food
safety reform initiative currently underway.
Just look at the “NEHA in Action” section of
our Web site to see over 10 different legisla-
tive initiatives and even more coalitions
and positions. NEHA is a business, and business
initiatives from our “Entrepreneurial Zone”
hold the promise of offsetting fiscal down-
turns in the near and long-term future. It’s an
exciting time to be on board with NEHA, as
we chart new territory, take positions on the
environmental issues of our day, and promote
our profession to the utmost.

As I write the first of 10 messages in this
esteemed professional journal, a tragic en-
vironmental disaster is looming just off our
southern coast. Some 1.6 million gallons of
crude oil, at the rate of 210,000 gallons per
day, is gushing into the Gulf of Mexico as a re-
sult of a ruptured underwater well leased by
the giant oil company BP (formerly British Petro-
leum). Federal officials have closed a portion
of the northern Gulf of Mexico to fishing, as
the rapidly growing oil spill, now the size of
Delaware, initially threatens four states. As
you read this, you will know if the calamity
was somewhat contained or if the mess hit
the Gulf Stream and whipped around Florida
to contaminate the beaches along our eastern
seaboard with worldwide consequences. This
event shows that we must be ever vigilant in
our profession and the next environmental is-
sue is just a few days away. As this event plays
out, I think it is only appropriate that NEHA
take a stand on off-shore drilling. This one
incident is but a portion, a Venn diagram if
you will, of the much larger issue of sustain-
ability. NEHA recognizes the importance of
sustaining our earth’s environment for future
generations. NEHA stands for the belief that
protecting our natural environment is critical
to the health and prosperity of our communi-
ties, our country, and as we see, our world.

I often hear, usually in talking to affili-
ate members who are not NEHA members,
“What can NEHA do for me? What is the
benefit of membership?” I think it’s impor-
tant to spell out just what the benefits are
of belonging and why it’s important to have
a strong and relevant national organization.
Oh sure, we can cite the hard benefits—the
Journal you are reading right now, the creden-
tialing, the e-Learning program, reduced fees
for the AEC & Exhibition, books, and other
merchandise. You could say that NEHA pro-
vides its members with more training oppor-
tunities than any other national organization
and you would be correct. But foremost, it is
connecting with other environmental health
practitioners across the nation that offers
the most value. NEHA is THE relevant national
organization that represents our profession.

I look forward to a great year. Your board
of directors is the finest group of profession-
als I have ever had the pleasure to be associ-
ated with. They are your elected officers and
regional representatives who actually govern
our organization. Heck, the president can’t
even cast a vote at a board meeting unless
there is a tie! Get to know your national of-
ficers and your own regional vice president.
Give them feedback and make suggestions
for improvement and never lose focus that
the National Environmental Health Associa-
tion is YOURS.

Also, please make plans—it’s not that far
off—to join me in my adoptive city of Co-
lumbus, June 15–18, 2011, for our Diamond
75th Annual Educational Conference & Exhi-
bition. The planning is well underway and it
promises to be a great educational experience.
Besides, C-Bus is a beautiful city and I know
you won’t be disappointed! Oh, and don’t for-
get to pack some scarlet and gray . . . .