Empirically, NEHA presidents have used the first “President’s Message” column as an opportunity to introduce themselves. In doing so they tend to describe varied backgrounds and experience that qualified each for national office. With your indulgence, I would like to advance the agenda a bit by adding perspective as to why I felt compelled to become NEHA president.

I am a lifelong learner. In childhood and throughout my education, I learned from and was coached by my mother, who was a public health nurse, and a career military officer dad. Through the formative years, in addition to obligatory hygiene lessons and hierarchically correct reminders, they taught me to capitalize on capacities, learn from mistakes, and reciprocate on that which is good. Education, athletics, and job experiences fueled a competitive edge that nurtured risk taking and an expectation for high-level accomplishment. I also developed a desire (need) to do well.

In college I chose biology as a major with minors in chemistry and psychology. My choice was the result of influence from a friend of the family who was a physician. I was an asthmatic kid and he explained how asthma, and human health in general, are integrated with the environment in which we live and even more so, the ecology within. I was captivated by the cause and effect connection. Inadvertently, he created a means to an end, which ultimately led to a career choice.

I worked in a restaurant throughout college and was required to get a “food handler’s card.” Sitting in a crowded basement classroom below the municipal library in El Paso, Texas, I listened to two guys called “sanitarians.” They spoke of how important it was as a restaurant worker to “wash your hands!” They addressed basic chemistry related to “sanitizing solutions” and how they attempted to change behaviors that contribute to foodborne illness. They also discussed X-rays used to screen for tuberculosis in food service workers. In those moments, my focus shifted from attaining a restaurant worker “food handler card” to a potential career marriage for a developing microbiology, chemistry, psychology, and now, environmental-public health interest. At a break, I engaged the “sanitarians” about the breadth of their work and serendipitously discovered a career path. I revealed in the thought of preventing or mitigating illness and injury while promoting well-being and balance with a healthy environment.

Fast forward through 25+ years. I have been novice, technician, specialist, supervisor, manager, and director—each as a sanitarian. Learning continues even now as knowledge, skill, and relevance demand change. I acquired a Master of Science degree in human relations and business as the scope of my job changed, but so too had the profession. The field of practice was now known as environmental health and professionals within it as environmental health specialists. I learned from professional practice that a managed and favorable balance between environmental and human health “provides for better economies, increased productivity, fewer social issues, higher education attainment, reduced health care costs, and a better overall quality of life (Larry Gordon, personal communication, January 20, 2011).”

When I wanted greater exposure to the practice and profession, I looked to the Texas Environmental Health Association (TEHA). There I had the opportunity to receive coaching and mentoring from accomplished professionals in the state. Eventually, I sought election and ran the chairs so I could, to some degree, be in a position to repay or give something back in exchange for invaluable education from mentors and coaches.

In 2000, after 12 years of NEHA membership, an opportunity presented itself to pursue the NEHA Region 5 vice president position. My thinking was, “How can I expand my knowledge, skills, and attitude regarding environmental health with yet broader application?” I believe Maslow characterized this purpose as “metamotivation” (Motivation and Personality, 1954). Be mindful that metamotivation is not altruistic, but rather a focus on becoming the best you can be in service to self and others.

In 2005 “metamotivation” kicked in again and I ran for NEHA second vice president.
Defeated by former NEHA President Welford Roberts in 2006, the experience reminded me that not only is running for elected office a risk but that defeat must also be instructive. The refrain my parents instilled resonated, my competitive spirit awakened, and I remained committed to give back to the profession and association that provided me so much opportunity. I ran unopposed in 2008. (By the way, Dr. Roberts did a great job and I admire him greatly!)

I have benefited professionally, intellectually, and socially from NEHA. I was credentialed, received numerous hours of current and relevant training, established a network of professionals (many of whom are not only associates but friends!), published a number of times, and have traveled nationally and internationally. NEHA enabled this for me as a member. Years on the board, and especially the last few as a national officer, allowed me to assist in charting association policy and direction. In doing so, objectives I hoped to accomplish in the presidency were attended.

So now as I come in to office, it seems odd transitioning my focus from presidential aspirations to helping NEHA achieve and attain yet greater success—a different captain in the wheelhouse of a great vessel! In the next year, the association will grow in capacity and resources. NEHA will take measured risks. We will capitalize on capacities and we will learn from mistakes! I will keep you posted and provide a summary report a year from now in my final “President’s Message.”

I am honored by opportunity, and by duty and promise, look forward to serving you, the profession, and NEHA. In a year, and after all that NEHA has done for me, when someone asks what legacy I attempted as NEHA president, the response will be, “It’s all about giving back!”

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NEHA is adding two new food safety credentials to its credentialing program. These credentials, which will enhance the country’s food safety prevention initiatives, will be available this summer. Check NEHA’s Web site for updates on the release of these significant credentials.

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