It is an honor to serve on NEHA’s board of directors and as our association’s 79th president. Our board just received word that we now have a membership that includes over 5,000 environmental health professionals from across the nation and throughout the world. This is a testament to the great work that our association is doing and to each of you for spreading the word about the benefits of belonging to the premier organization for environmental health professionals.

Thank you for the opportunity to share a bit of information about my background and a few hints about what the coming year holds for NEHA. I have been a Registered Environmental Health Specialist in California for 25 years and as of a few weeks ago, retired as the deputy division chief with the Sacramento County Environmental Management Department. I am now in Georgia with my husband Rick Collins and our beloved pets.

Along with my division chief, Mr. John Rogers, and a phenomenal management team, I led a team of extremely competent environmental health professionals and support personnel and managed numerous programs, including a quite remarkable food protection program. In January 2007, we implemented a series of food program enhancements, with the most visible component being a color-coded placard food safety rating system. This green, yellow, and red placard posting program was the first of its kind in the U.S. And, most notably, the idea for this best practice was born at NEHA’s 2004 Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition in Anchorage, Alaska, where the leadership from the Toronto Public Health Department, who created this program, shared this information.

Making this connection with our colleagues in Toronto, Canada, through participating in the AEC was the genesis of a food safety movement in Sacramento. As a result of this networking and ability to glean from other respected organizations, retail food business operators have made food safety a priority; consumers can make informed choices when they dine, and the environmental health professionals conducting their day-to-day work have better tools to assist them during consultations and inspections. I am pleased to note that several other jurisdictions nationwide are looking closely at new food safety disclosure systems and am thankful that NEHA can assist with spreading the good word about best practice environmental health programs.

Throughout my career, I spent many years volunteering with our state affiliate, the California Environmental Health Association (CEHA), where I spent time serving on the local chapter board, serving as the CEHA secretary, and then eventually serving as CEHA president. During this time, Mr. Dick Pantages was the NEHA Regional Vice President (RVP) for Region 2 (Region 2 covers Arizona, California, Hawaii, and Nevada) and he represented NEHA at the CEHA board of directors’ meetings. Dick did an excellent job of providing NEHA updates and relaying significant issues impacting our profession from a national perspective. He encouraged NEHA involvement and emphasized the importance of broadening our network so that we could share information and gain insights from others that may have already encountered similar challenges. To this day, I fondly recall these efforts by Dick and look to him as a great mentor and friend.

During my term as CEHA’s president, I learned about the assistance and mentoring activities provided to affiliates by Mr. Nelson Fabian, NEHA’s executive director. I invited him to meet with our CEHA executive committee to educate us and provide advice on leading an organization of our size. Our CEHA officers were pleased to receive notice that he had accepted our invitation and was going to fly to Sacramento to meet with us for several hours. We truly appreciated the time he took to understand our questions, to provide advice, and to share experiences he believed were relevant and would be helpful for us. I recently came upon a photo from that meeting and a follow-up...
handwritten note from Nelson. It brought me back to the year 2000 and a full circle of mentorship and networking with our leadership at both state and national levels. My goal is to continually provide a return on those initial investments of mentorship by supporting esteemed colleagues and mentoring aspiring professionals just now entering the workforce.

Several years later, I was elected to the NEHA board of directors as the RVP for Region 2 and had the privilege of interacting and exchanging information with respected colleagues within the region. This exchange ranged from topics and/or training opportunities such as body art legislation, medical marijuana dispensaries, environmental health training in emergency response (EHTER), insect and rodent control training, Registered Environmental Health Specialist legislation and reciprocity, position papers on raw milk and sustainability, and the use of new technologies in our day-to-day work. There is never a dull moment in environmental health.

To continue on this path of information exchange, mentorship, networking, and leadership throughout the coming year, we will see even more partnerships with federal agencies, additional communication with your affiliate representatives, and award recognition opportunities for environmental health practitioners.

As the Food Safety Modernization Act mandates an integrated food safety system in the U.S., NEHA has partnered with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to assist with this effort through a five-year cooperative agreement. I just had the privilege of participating in a stakeholder meeting to begin discussions about the development of a food registry, a protected online repository that will hold information on food safety credentials, credentialing bodies, and individuals.

Our board of directors is obtaining input from your affiliate presidents to explore the most optimal methods to exchange information between affiliates and the board of directors throughout the year. After receiving input from members, your board recently approved two new awards to recognize practitioners who have made contributions to the profession by way of innovation or educational contribution.

Due to the overwhelming success and demand for the Epi-Ready foodborne illness response course, an extensive revision was completed in collaboration with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A similar course to include industry representatives is also being designed in partnership with FDA and a variety of stakeholders.

These are just a few examples of NEHA's exciting activities. I look forward to leading the nation's premier organization for environmental health professionals this year with the commitment of a talented board of directors, the support of dedicated NEHA staff, and with your input. With a network of over 5,000 environmental health professionals in NEHA, there are numerous opportunities to exchange information, to be enriched professionally, and to effect positive changes within our communities. With so many environmental health issues now receiving media attention and integrated into the daily lives of our communities, we can proudly be present and available to serve our communities.

The handwritten note from Nelson Fabian that I received after our 2000 CEHA leadership meeting …who would have guessed the impact of that meeting and mentorship on my professional career and involvement in NEHA.

Did You Know?

If you were unable attend the NEHA 2013 AEC in person, you can access it online instead. About 25 sessions were recorded live and archived for you to view and learn. You can earn continuing education credits and network with environmental health professionals, speakers, and exhibitors who attended the AEC. To register for access to the Virtual AEC, visit neha2013aec.org.