

► DirecTalk



David Dyjack, DrPH, CIH

Summer in Iowa

On Friday, April 29, 2022, a public health environmentalist with the Alabama Department of Public Health died in a tragic incident that occurred while performing the basic duties of her job. Jacqueline (Summer) Beard, an environmental supervisor with the department for 17 years, was conducting a basic public health follow up of a substantial dog bite situation that had occurred the previous day. Beard reportedly went alone for the visit, seemingly had no response from anyone at the residence, and was attempting to leave a public health notice when she was attacked and killed by a pack of dogs. By all accounts, these animals were the same dogs that had seriously injured another individual the previous day.

Summer Beard personifies the spirit of our members and profession. People in our professional network are often abstract to us. We hear the names, read the email messages, and might encounter them at a virtual or in-person event. They are the personalities behind the figures—6,700 NEHA members. That is 6,700 stories. That is 6,700 struggles. That is 6,700 individuals who work tirelessly to protect the health, safety, and economic prosperity of their communities. And in some cases, like Beard, people who literally give their lives to make a difference.

Making a difference is the central driving force of our organization. Our members are for the most part modestly compensated, largely invisible, public servants. They are part of complex political or corporate systems that discourage them from claiming credit for a job well done, speaking up, or

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speaking out. I feel that is where our association should step in and step up.

You rely on us to do that for you. You rely on us for training, capacity building, and validation. It has been my experience that you rely on us for a safe harbor to share your fears, celebrate your successes, and express your insights. We desire to be that place for you.

I shared my profound grief about Beard during a presentation I delivered in Ames, Iowa, at the joint American Public Health Association–National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) affiliate conference in early May. While you have been relentlessly pummeled with my impressions over the localness and emotional attributes of environmental public health during my time at NEHA, it was rewarding to hear those sentiments being echoed by professionals anchored in data science. For example, Dr. Katelyn Jetelina, an epidemiologist from Texas, spoke to the issues of misinformation and disinformation related to the pandemic. Dr. Jetelina has approximately 50,000 Twitter followers and a newsletter (Your Local Epidemiologist) that is read by millions worldwide.

I was impressed by Dr. Jetelina's observations and at the same time, was unsurprised by her disclosures. A handful of families control most social media in the U.S., and thus have a disproportionate strangle hold on the news and information most people consume. She encouraged the audience to play an active role in combating disinformation and misinformation, and to recognize the complex dimensions to our profession. People have an emotional relationship with data. She also made patently clear that our journey in explaining data starts with family and friends. How much more local does an issue get?

This idea of localness also strikes a chord with me in my role as a member on a federal advisory committee. I am appointed to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA) Federal Advisory Committee on North America Environmental Cooperation, a national advisory group that convenes to provide input and guidance to U.S. EPA Administrator Michael Regan. In that capacity, my respect and appreciation of Native American people has trebled. The concept of traditional ecological knowledge, that is, the value represented by the hyper-local insight and understanding of the environment by Native Americans is proving valuable in our challenges with addressing climate change and extreme natural calamities. Their recommendations reflect ages of observation and understanding of resource management, coupled with a deeply held reverence for the world around us. Those of us in the public

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health enterprise should drink deeply from that chalice of wisdom.

About the time you are reading this column, we will have or will soon release our new mission, vision, and values statements. We will showcase our new logo—the first new one in over 40 years—at our Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition in Spokane, Washington. These developments, in aggregate, are manifestations of our continued organizational growth and maturity. They reflect the best thinking of our staff and representatives of the association—your elected board of directors. We embark on the next step of our journey with one dose of excitement, one half dose of fear, and three doses of adrenaline. A powerful concoction of emotion and hormones. We hope you can feel this energy and ambition from your hometown.

In a few months we plan to release training and templates that you can use to promote the environmental health profession at the local level. This project is intended to provide the tools and resources you need to speak effectively on behalf of our profession and community health. We are threading this effort with our national initiatives to speak with one voice in Washington, DC; Atlanta;



A sample of environmental health faces in Iowa. Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.

and your local agency or company. This is our moment.

The experiences and developments I describe within this column give me pause. I reflect on their meaning and the messages they send me about the state of our profession. While I desire NEHA to be part of the next great thing, there is ample greatness already at our fingertips. We, as a profession, have the commitment, courage, and character of Summer Beard. We have the local relationships to confront and dispatch misinformation and disinformation at their source. Our partners desire to share their insight and collaborate to advance our common health.

One of our primary purposes as an association is to give the environmental health profession a voice and a face. To honor those who do so much and often receive so little in return. Our job is to remind the world that our profession is populated with noble, committed professionals like Beard, and like you.

Life is fragile. Let us value and support each other while we value and support those who comprise the environmental health profession. 🐻

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