Final Thoughts by Paul Cunningham

When I began my job as the manager of planning and data at the Arkansas Hospital Association (AHA) in December 1980, I knew it was a great career opportunity, although I probably didn’t suspect that I was about to be part of an organization which would come to be recognized among the most effective, successful and trusted statewide advocacy organizations in Arkansas and, arguably, the country.

Because hindsight’s 20/20, I can look back now, almost 38 years later, as I prepare to retire at the end of the month from my position as AHA’s executive vice president, and fully appreciate that walking through those doors on the 4th floor of the Prospect Building located in the Heights area of Little Rock turned out to be not just a great career opportunity, but a tailor-made fit for an amazing career which I couldn’t even have imagined at the time.

There is an old adage that advises us to “find something you love to do and you’ll never have to work a day in your life.” It ought to be a universal truth. I can’t recall a day during the past 37-plus years when I didn’t want to come to work. That’s because not only have I loved what I do, but also because I’ve been able to do it from start to finish while working for and with people across the state whom I admire and respect so much and whose calling it has been to make life better and less worrisome for the people in communities throughout Arkansas.

Certainly, they include the folks who have manned the bridges in hospital C-suites across the state to plot a course for their ships, many of whom still found time to serve on the AHA board. But, every bit as much, they include the assorted ranks of healthcare professionals and other employees who have worked day-in and day-out to keep the engines purring smoothly and steer their vessels in the right direction, out of harm’s way. Thanks to all of you for doing what you do so well.

The AHA is driven by the underlying idea of removing barriers which can hinder the ability of its member organizations to serve their patients. That purpose hasn’t changed since AHA was first established in 1929 and is at the core of its mission statement today. It is the measure of success and guides practically everything we do, from advocacy to educational programming, quality improvement initiatives, data/policy analysis and even the varied types of communications aimed at keeping members up to date on major issues.

I’ve had the unique opportunity to be involved one way or another with each of those functions. All have been challenging and satisfying. However, I have a special penchant for my duties gathered under the “communication” umbrella, particularly in my role as editor of The Notebook for the past 15 years. My purpose, especially in the roughly 225 Final Thoughts columns that have filled this space, has been not only to inform, but to entertain, too. Because healthcare is rarely surrounded or suffused with good news, I’ve tried occasionally to have some fun using historical and pop culture allusions to set up a point and maybe to coax an occasional smile or chuckle from readers. In doing so, if I’ve been able to connect and get folks to reflect on events that all too often seem to play out in a theater of the absurd setting, then all the better.

I hope The Notebook has also been useful in creating a paper trail highlighting accomplishments stemming from AHA’s formula for success. Although there have been slips along the way, mixing a fiercely dedicated staff with a supportive board and membership has yielded many major AHA victories, including those behind-the-camera wins that aren’t always easily visible. All are gains to be proud of and it’s been my good fortune to have made a small contribution to many of them.

And what a blessing it has been to be a part of the AHA staff in all of its configurations over the years. Like the New York Yankees have found ways to transition from one all-star lineup to another for decades, the AHA team has remained at the top of its game, despite the inevitable changes over time. Those combined staffs during my years, top to bottom, have included the smartest, most talented, committed, enthusiastic and principled group of all-stars who constantly have strived to achieve goals and objectives with the best interests of Arkansas’ patients and hospital community at heart. I am both honored and privileged to have worked side-by-side with them over the years to set a hallmark for accomplishment and respect that is the envy of other groups.

Finally, I want to offer a sincere thanks for the support and positive feedback from readers of The Notebook. You have made my job even more rewarding. I look forward to joining your ranks in the future and reading about more AHA success stories, especially if they involve anything remotely related to protecting my Medicare benefits.

Bay