Address by Chair-elect of the ADEA Board of Directors

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This address by the 2015-16 Chair-elect of the ADEA Board of Directors was presented to the ADEA House of Delegates at the 93rd ADEA Annual Session & Exhibition in Denver, Colorado. Dr. Feldman is Dean of Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, School of Dental Medicine.

Good afternoon and welcome to the mile high city at the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Over this past year, it has been an honor and privilege to serve as your Chair-elect of the ADEA Board of Directors. Now I stand before you as your soon-to-be Chair, a position that carries even greater responsibility. I am following in the footsteps of many notable presidents and chairs, and I only hope that I am able to perform as admirably for you as they have done.

My Family Background

A little about myself—I grew up in Clifton, New Jersey, a town about 15 miles from New York City. Members of my family have come from or lived in a smorgasbord of countries: Germany, Poland, Russia, Lithuania, China, Cuba, El Salvador. America was their dream, as there was much unrest, hardship, prejudice, and intolerance in their ancestral homelands.

Education has always one of the most important values in my family. My mother and many of my grandparents and great-grandparents were tutors and teachers. Two of my grandparents (both immigrants from Eastern Europe) were pharmacists, with my grandmother being one of the few women to graduate from the Albany College of Pharmacy in the early 1900s.

After serving in World War II and participating in the Battle of the Bulge, my father, a combat veteran, became an orthodontist—a profession that defined his life. It is from my parents that I gained a love for family, a love for learning, a love for discovery, a love for forging new paths, and a love for helping others.

I have three sisters, so my father was surrounded by all women. He was of a generation who believed that a woman’s career choices were limited and thus was very surprised when we all went on to become professionals in a number of fields, including finance, real estate, law, and, of course, dentistry.

I am so fortunate to have met and married a man like no other, Dr. Harry Zohn. Harry also is a dental educator, as well as being a periodontist by training, a forensic odontologist by avocation, and most importantly, the love of my life, my best friend, and my knight in shining armor. His incredible sense of humor keeps me laughing, and his concern for and kindness to others have been a model for us all.

Professional Background: How Did I Get Here

My first university job, as an undergraduate student, was in the Registrar’s Office at the University of Pennsylvania. There was a time when enrolling in and changing classes meant going to the school’s gym and queuing up in long lines. Each time a change was made, a paper form was filled out. And I had the worst university job: alphabetizing and filing thousands of drop/add forms. It did, however, introduce me to the role of the registrar and the importance of academic integrity.

Luckily, computers have put an end to that task, but it was the beginning of my academic career that has already spanned almost 40 years. My career was made possible because of incredible mentors and role models, who provided support, opened doors, and were always willing to provide advice along the way:

• While in dental school as a research fellow, I had the privilege of working side by side with Dr. Robert Zemsky, the university’s Director of Institutional Research, and Dr. James Galbally, the CFO for the dental school. So as a dental student, I was able to taste what it was like working in academia. My first grant was researching market
theory on dental school applicants, an experience that opened my eyes to the wonderful world of research and discovery.

- My office (yes—I had an office when I was in dental school) was right across the hall from Dr. D. Walter Cohen. Dr. Cohen was an inspiration to many, including myself. He inspired generations and demonstrated that a dental school dean could excel in academic medicine.

- Dr. Robert Saporito recruited me from Penn to the then-University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey/New Jersey Dental School. He always said that he was the “suit” and I was the “brains,” making up an unparalleled partnership that lasted for over two decades.

- Dr. Anthony Volpe, known to all of his friends at Rutgers as Uncle Tony, was never too busy, with no task too small or project too big. He has traveled and is recognized all over the world, yet he has never forgotten his Newark roots, his alma mater, or his friends.

- Dr. Arnold Rosenheck was always opening doors and introducing me to new people. He would give his shirt off his back to help both friends and strangers, and he taught me how to work with boards, legislators, and politicians.

- Dr. Denise Rodgers, the fifth President of the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, and Dr. Kathleen Scotto, Dean of the Rutgers Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, exemplify leadership in its purest sense. Their uncompromising commitment to integrity, their unyielding dedication for doing what is right, and their steadfast belief in others has made an indelible mark on me and many others.

For the last 17 years, I have been Dean of the New Jersey Dental School, now the Rutgers School of Dental Medicine. It has been and continues to be an honor to lead the astonishing group of people who work there.

Rutgers School of Dental Medicine has a heart and soul that strives to inspire the next generation of dentists, a pioneering spirit to push forward our boundaries of knowledge, and entrepreneurial drive to do new things in new ways. Along with Dr. Kim Fenesy, our Senior Associate Dean for Academic and Student Affairs, who always acts with extreme grace and fortitude, and an extraordinary group of chairs and deans, I couldn’t ask for a better leadership team or a more dedicated and talented faculty.

ADEA’s Impact on My Career

ADEA has also had an incredible impact on my career. Early on, it was a place for meeting new colleagues and friends, developing collaborations, and hearing about what others were doing. From my early days in the Section on Dental Informatics with forward thinkers such as Dr. John Eisner, Dr. John Williams, Dr. Gary Guest, and Dr. Lynn Johnson and my early days in the Section on Clinic Administration with trailblazers such as Dr. William Dodge, Dr. Leo Rouse, and Dr. Denice Stewart, there was always someone whom I could confide in, get advice from, or just share a story or two with.

I was fortunate to have been able to join the inaugural class of the ADEA Leadership Institute and later serve as a faculty mentor. I have such fond memories of those experiences as we grew together and had an opportunity to think about the future. And it was there that I was able to spend time with another one of my mentors, Prof. Pamela Zarkowski, an individual with many talents, great stories, and a passion for sharing with others.

For the last decade and a half, my home in ADEA has been in the Council of Deans, a council that has been extremely welcoming—consisting of a special group of individuals whose sole desire is to make our dental schools the best they can be.

Next Year’s Priorities

Over the next year, I hope to focus on three major priorities: protecting dental education’s place in our nation’s universities, exploring how our dental programs and curricula can drive change, and helping ADEA continue to be the leading voice for dental education.

Let’s talk first about safeguarding our place in today’s great universities. The dramatic growth in technology, the drive to provide the best possible educational experience, the desire to grow our research programs, and the need to be active in the communities in which we live are relentlessly driving up our costs. We must manage these costs and figure out how to diversify our revenue, because if we don’t, we will become liabilities to our universities.

For dental schools in research-intensive universities, it is critical that the school’s research program be vibrant and strong. While our research programs will never be as large as some other units of the university, they need to be of the same caliber and have the same growth trajectory. Strengthening our
schools’ research will serve a dual role of being at the forefront of discovery, while cementing our place in our nation’s great universities. Without that, we risk being redefined as trade schools. As new discoveries will create new and more effective therapies, enable personalized care, and make the delivery of care more efficient, this focus results in a win-win situation for all involved.

Our evolving health care system is also creating new possibilities. As health care reform continues to move forward, we must become part of our universities’ rapidly evolving health care networks. To not become part of these networks will cause separation from our medical, nursing, pharmacy, and other health care colleagues.

Thus, the relentless pursuit of strategic partnerships, a phrase you have heard Dr. Richard Valachovic say over and over again, is a strategy that is not just essential for ADEA, but one we all must embrace if we are to become an indispensable part of our universities. ADEA can help schools and programs understand all these changes, see new opportunities, and identify and share best practices.

Second is an initiative for exploring current trends and thinking about how we should transform our programs to help shape the future. Interprofessional health care teams, new oral health providers, value-driven health care—these are just a small sampling of the multifaceted issues and trends that we will need to explore.

Over the next several weeks, I will be creating a task force to engage in this exploration and envision different futures. Note that I referred to different futures—not just one future.

While we can’t predict the future with much accuracy, we can begin to think about a range of initiatives we may want to employ to increase the odds of shaping a world we can be proud of. If we wait for change to happen and then begin to react, we will have missed the opportunity to affect our future. Only by using our collective imagination and moving forward before these directions are set can we help create the future that will be the best for our students, our patients, our universities, and our profession.

The third priority is helping ADEA continue to be the leading voice for dental education. ADEA has a critically important role to play as our nation continues to debate how to provide affordable health care, including oral health care. With threats to the National Institutes of Health, the Health Resources and Services Administration, loan redemption programs, Gradual Medical Education, and Title VII, funding is constantly at risk. For these and many other reasons, the need for strong advocacy is more important than ever.

But this role doesn’t end at the border. Climate change demonstrates that we live on a very small planet, a planet that is very interconnected. Dental education is no different as ADEA’s influence reaches far beyond our North American boundaries. Whether we want to or not, we need to recognize the responsibility that comes with this voice and use it in a way to advance dental education around the world.

Annual Session 2017

Even though the 2016 Annual Session is just getting started, I have already begun to think about 2017. We have an unprecedented opportunity to shape both the profession and our educational system. We would be losing this opportunity, however, if we don’t look at our world through a new lens.

In the 1980s and 1990s, my husband and I took several days a year to go scuba diving. It was always amazing how, from the land or even a boat, we would look out onto the ocean and see an endless body of water. Occasionally, when looking down, we would see something that appeared to be moving. But anything swimming in the water wasn’t clear, just a shadow against a murky blue background. It wasn’t until we donned our scuba tanks, our masks, and our fins and jumped into the water that a whole new amazing colorful world opened up. The coral reefs were magnificent, swarming with all kinds of life from sea anemones to clown fish to moray eels. The turtles that looked so clumsy on land were magnificent swimmers—as graceful as ballerinas.

Over the past three years, my husband and I had the opportunity to travel to Africa and to Antarctica. Going from the cradle of humankind to the last unsettled continent on earth, we could not help but look at our world in a different way.

Thus, with an imperative to think differently, next year’s Annual Session is being planned. The theme “Beyond Boundaries” focuses on looking through a new lens to see new horizons and new worlds; it’s about thinking beyond what we currently know so we can form new thoughts and dream new ideas; and it entails going beyond our comfort zone to immerse ourselves in new experiences and feel new emotions.

“Beyond Boundaries” as next year’s Annual Session theme requires an inspirational leader who can see the world through different lenses. I am so
pleased to announce that we have such a leader: Dr. Pamela Hughes, Chair of the Department of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery at Oregon Health & Science University, who has agreed to serve as next year’s Chair of the ADEA Annual Session Program Committee. Dr. Hughes is a gifted and talented surgeon, who is already at work promising to make next year’s meeting the best ever.

Final Thoughts

In closing, I want to again emphasize that I am so honored and privileged to be able to serve as your Chair-elect. ADEA is an incredible organization, made up of amazing people. Our association is second to none and well positioned to thrive for many years to come. Your time, effort, and passion are what make our dental schools and dental programs the best in the world. So I want to thank everyone here for all of your hard work and all that you do for ADEA.

Enjoy this year’s Annual Session. It promises to be a wonderful meeting, a meeting that will break all records. Over the next several days, I look forward to seeing and talking with you all.

Thank you.