



Leadership as a Legacy....100 Years of Volunteer Leadership in the GLAO

By: Dale Anne Featheringham

In October of this year, the Great Lakes Association of Orthodontists will hit a special milestone—it will be 100 years old! As we prepare for a wonderful celebration of this event in Columbus, Ohio on October 23-24th, it's interesting to think about what has made this organization so successful over the past century. In other words, what makes an organization sustainable and successful? If you talk to anyone who has participated in volunteer leadership, the conclusion that you'll quickly come to is that it's *the people* who make it great.

The GLAO has a long legacy of great volunteer leaders, but one family's story is unique—the story of the Dellinger family from Fort Wayne, Indiana. The Dellingers have a long history of volunteer leadership within the Great Lakes. Their story began when Gene Dellinger agreed to be on the GLAO board in the 1970s, and eventually went on the executive committee and became president in 1981. His son, Aron, was 9 at the time, and remembers going to his dad's meeting in Hawaii. He said that he remembers “knowing that his dad was doing something important...something that he loved”. He also recalls the kindness of the people that he met as a kid. Those impressions, along with being raised by a mother who “always found time to help out whenever asked” caused Aron to want to get involved with the GLAO when he was tapped on the shoulder by Dr. John Barbour in the early 2000s. He was just a few years out of residency at the time, but Aron ultimately went through the chairs, and became president in 2016—35 years after his father. In addition, Aron's brother, Eric, was also influenced to serve in organized orthodontics. “My brother decided to get heavily involved in the College of Diplomats of the American Board of Orthodontics, eventually going through every position in that organization. He was a responsible, capable and effective leader as they tackled the challenge of revamping the testing format for board certification—no easy task—and continues to be involved with the organization as a trusted advisor to the group”.

I recently sat down with Aron, and we discussed that although the “father-son” aspect of their leadership story is unusual, there are several common themes that all Great Lakes volunteer leaders seem to experience:

Someone taps you on the shoulder and asks you to step up and get involved

Although Aron was already primed to want to be involved in the GLAO, he remembers a dinner with Dr. John Barbour in Puerto Rico, where John encourage him to take a position as a director for Indiana. “I didn't think I was ready, or that I knew enough,” Aron said. That seems to be a common feeling among newer leaders, but GLAO has always had a history of people coming alongside inexperienced leaders to show them the ropes, and give them the context and support that they need to be successful. “I'll never forget getting a call from John Buzzatto before my first meeting. He spent a lot of time making sure that I was informed and ready”.

You come to the boardroom and are happily surprised

Aron's father, Gene, gave Aron advice early on when he was asked to volunteer: "The GLAO is full of wonderful and talented people that love our profession and want to get things done. If you have the chance to be part of it...I'd jump at that opportunity!" Aron obliged and soon found himself sitting around the board table learning about the organization and in the beginning of lifelong friendships. "You show up to do the job," Aron said, "...but you have no idea how your life will be changed by the relationships you make along the way".

Your fellow board members become your role models, wise counsel, and dear friends

As you progress through your volunteer career, you realize that the "acquaintances" that you met at your first meeting slowly become important people in your life. Through the experiences of solving problems together, socializing, and sharing information about one another's families, practices, and lives, strong friendships are built. In addition, as you reflect over several years of service, you realize not only the impact that you have made in guiding and stewarding the profession, but also that the volunteer leaders that you had the privilege of serving with have made an incredible impact on you along the way. "I feel like I have taken something meaningful, in terms of leadership style, skills, and desirable personality traits, from so many of the people that I have served with in the GLAO,, said Aron. "I think back to the way Phil Beckwith could disagree while being diplomatic and articulate, to Scott Jamieson's impeccable ethics, to Jerry Hickman's supportiveness and diligence in decision-making, to Valmy Pangrazio-Kulbersh's ability to add warmth to any situation, to Richard Kulbersh's passion for our profession, to Bob Brown's kindness, to Tom Ahman's wonderful relational style, to Debbie Nunner's organization and ability to problem solve, to Gene Robert's continual encouragement and mentorship, and many, many other wonderful aspects of the people that I have encountered along the way. All these fellow leaders have influenced me, given me new ways of thinking about things, and changed how I relate to people in my life, both personally and professionally."

You joined the organization to give back, but somehow gained more in the process

When people think about volunteering, their minds sometimes goes directly to what it will "cost" them, but it's universally understood amongst people that have been involved that what you get in return for the loss of time and money is replaced by far more important things. "My Dad loved people. He loved being around people, serving people, and making people feel heard, understood, and appreciated. I have found those same traits in my volunteer leader friends in the GLAO. Any time or money that I have given up to be involved has been replaced tenfold by the wisdom and community that I have gained from official conversations in the boardroom, and "unofficial" conversations over dinners, at the bar, and at social events. I have learned much more than have I lost, and gained much more than I have given". Well said, Aron.

As the GLAO begins its second century as an organization, its success will depend upon new leaders stepping up to take the helm. It will be necessary for the next generation to adopt the "servant leader" mentality that has made it successful in the past, and to be willing to give up their time, talent, and treasure to the organization, like the Dellingers, and many others have done. It is the hope of those who have been involved in the first 100 years of the GLAO that the generations to come will experience success in keeping both the organization and our profession strong, and will enjoy the benefits of being involved.

While every leadership journey is “unique”, it is the shared experiences of: volunteering and growing with the encouragement and support of others; finding friends, allies, mentors, and role models around the board table; and giving to the profession through the organization—but receiving even more that will allow the GLAO to attract the next era of capable and talented leadership that will help it grow and prosper in the future. Here’s to the next 100 years!