

Remarks by Dr. Dennis H. Leverett on Receiving the John W. Knutson Distinguished Service Award

Dennis H. Leverett, DDS, MPH

I would like to extend my thanks to the Oral Health Section of the American Public Health Association for this beautiful tray, which represents its John W. Knutson Distinguished Service Award. Also, my sincerest gratitude for the generous honorarium from Colgate Oral Pharmaceuticals, represented here today by Dr. Christopher Fox.

This is an especially pleasurable moment for me. When I look at the list of previous awardees, I become truly embarrassed. With very few exceptions, I don't even know these people. They were of a different generation and, certainly, in a different league than me. Assuming that the award committee is basically of sound mind, I'm left only with the conclusion that I am profoundly grateful for the honor you have bestowed upon me.

Again, as I go over the list, it occurs to me that I may be the only awardee who didn't know John Knutson personally. At the same time, however, I confess having met him briefly in 1967-68 and admit further that my encounter was far from satisfactory and that, in a negative way, he had a profound influence on the direction of my career. You see, he refused to interview me for a job and then went on to tell Dr. Jim Dunning, my mentor, that I was looking for another position. As a result, my career was directed into small-town dental public health, and that forced me into unplanned career diversity.

I've mentioned "my career"—so just what is a career? It certainly is not something that most of us plan. It may



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not be too much of a stretch to "flip-flop" the old cliché and say that "a planned career is not worth living." It seems that my plans never came out the way I intended. Except, perhaps, at the very beginning way back in junior high, when I decided I wanted to become a dentist. However, by graduation day from dental school I was already disillusioned with dentistry and surprised myself by joining the USPHS. My four years begun in 1956 with the USPHS were a mixture of basic assembly-line general dentistry and what turned out to be that wonderful weird hybrid called "public health dentistry." Six weeks of my one-year rotating dental internship, as they were called in those days, was

spent with Polly Ayers, director of the Dental Public Health Program in Birmingham, Alabama. It was then a model dental public health program for the mid-1950s and earned much praise at the time. However, economics called, and I went into private practice for six years. But I kept recalling the time I spent with Polly Ayers in public health.

In 1965, my personal world changed when I met my wife Joyce and then in 1966 my professional world changed when I got my first real job in dental public health. The state of New Mexico was looking for someone to run a mobile dental clinic in the northern mountains of that state, while permanent dental clinics were being built. After one year, I decided if this was going to be my "career," then I needed an MPH. From that time, my career took many unexpected and unplanned turns.

And now, here I am back in the New Mexico mountains receiving the most unplanned honor for my unplanned career. How ironic! I guess it is true that big mesquite trees do grow from small beans.

There were so many people along the way of this unplanned journey that I could, or should, thank—but time grows short. So I will only thank the ones who were with me the entire way: my family. From the 15' Winnebago trailer with no plumbing to our lovely new home with plumbing—my family was always by my side.

You see—it all comes down *not* to right planning, but to the right plumbing!