

# Remarks on Receiving the John W. Knutson Distinguished Service Award

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For those to whom much is given,  
much is expected.

—President John F. Kennedy

First, I would like to thank all the speakers for their presentations tonight, reflecting on their experiences with me over the years. Many of them began with me as students, some worked for me, and some of them still work for me, but they don't know it (that's a joke!). I feel that we are one big family, because many of the things that were said here tonight in jest normally would not be said at a professional meeting—Alice (Horowitz)!!! But to me we are one family, we are the family of dental public health, the family of movers and shakers, the family of the Oral Health Section of APHA. We have worked together in many different arenas over the years. You have revealed some of my nondental activities, you have tried to tease and embarrass me in very nice ways, and that's what you do in families. I have six children and they are always teasing each other, but it's always done with love and respect, and I felt that love and respect here tonight, and I appreciate it.

## Thanks to the Oral Health Section and Sponsors—Early Beginnings, the ADA, and FTC

I wish to thank the officers and Section Council of the APHA Oral Health Section for their support of the Knutson Award, and for making this meeting and this section the success that it is. I appreciate it. I also want to thank the Dental Health Section, as it was named years ago, for giving me the opportunity to have a number of leadership positions in APHA. It all began with the Dental Health Section in the 1970s. I was on a number of committees and then in 1975 Dr. Gordon Vidmar called me and asked if I would be willing to run for chair-elect of the section. I was completely surprised, because I was not part of any in-group.

So when he called, it was quite an honor for me, and I ended up winning the election.

One of the more exciting things I did when I was program chair was to have a three-hour panel discussion at the 105th Annual Meeting in Washington, DC, entitled "Toward a National Dental Health Policy." It included the American Dental Association (ADA) and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). The ADA was then being investigated by the FTC, and I had one of the lawyers from the FTC and the president-elect of the ADA on the same panel with Drs. John Greene, John Ingle, and a congressional staffer from the House Subcommittee on Health. It was one of the most exciting meetings I can remember of the Oral Health Section. It was standing room only. We saw people who had never been to an APHA meeting before. I was just trying to find a way to help make the ADA more responsive to the public's needs. The ADA president-elect was fantastic. His name was Frank P. Bowyer, an orthodontist from Tennessee. He had many tough questions and we went about an hour and a quarter over time. But he was always gracious and acted in a positive and professional manner.

There was much concern that the ADA was not doing anything about fluoridation—nothing. We recommended that the ADA hire someone to work full time on fluoridation and have an advisory committee to give the ADA some direction on how to proceed. Frank made that happen and, as a matter of fact, as they were looking to fill the position, about six or nine months later, I was offered the position. I declined and stayed in Boston. The ADA began working on fluoridation again, and it was as a result of an APHA meeting. I guess the Oral Health Section expected even more of me, because they asked me to run a second time, in 1978. I did and that too was a very exciting time for me and dental public health. It also helped

prepare me to become more involved in APHA and eventually become president. I want to thank the section for giving me these opportunities.

The members of the Awards Committee and especially Clare Shaffer deserve a special thanks. Clare was the perfect chair of the committee because as one of 11 children, she was very easy to work with. She kept asking me how many of my children were coming. First it was one, then two, then six, and then four. As the numbers kept going up and down, she understood, and was very patient. She was dependable, did quality work, listened to me, and was always very cooperative. Clare had worked for Dennis Leverett, who died over a year ago, and I can understand why he thought so highly of her. As a matter of fact, Clare was so efficient, she sent this year's programs out to all the previous recipients before the ceremony letting them know about the program. I received a very nice letter from Dennis's wife, Joyce, congratulating me, because Dennis was also trained in Boston and was a previous Knutson Award winner.

I also want to thank the Colgate Oral Pharmaceuticals of the Colgate Palmolive Company and Dr. Chris Fox for their continuing support of the Knutson Award. It's deeply appreciated. Mr. Steven Knight and Mr. Tom Meighan of DNTLworks Equipment Corporation were also generous in providing enough food to sustain us for this long evening.

## Thanks to My Agency—the Early Years of Boston's Dental Program

I also want to thank the administration and my co-workers over the years in the City of Boston Health Department, which is now called the Boston Public Health Commission. I began in this position in 1970 after a national search. Within six months a member of the city council was asking for my resignation because he alleged I discriminated against four "foreign-trained city dentists," even though

none of them was licensed to practice dentistry. When I joined the city health department, I inherited about 50 dental personnel who were civil service and unionized. They came to work late and left early. There were no x-ray machines, no autoclaves, and no fluoride treatments. For 22 dentists there were only eight amalgam carvers. They just provided limited crisis-oriented children's dentistry. Previously, I had been working for the Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) and the Harvard School of Dental Medicine. My colleagues there couldn't understand why I would want to leave Harvard and MGH to work for the city, which had such a terrible program. I thought of this as a challenge in a city with great unmet dental needs and a very poor dental care program.

We fought many battles and now have 18 health center dental programs with over 85,000 patient visits, and 130 personnel who provide the full scope of care to people of all ages. That city councilor who wanted my resignation is still on the city council. I had another confrontation with him many years later at a community meeting after which he went to the commissioner and told him he never wanted to be in the same room with me again. It was a very serious confrontation. I was representing the commissioner at a community health center board meeting, where the medical director, who was a local physician, hired some of his friends and relatives and was laying off the nurse practitioners and quality co-workers. He was moving the program backward and into deep debt. The commissioner put me on the board because the health center had an excellent dental program that the community board highly appreciated, including the dentists who worked there, one of whom was Dr. Gregory Connolly. I walked into a room with 300 hostile community people, but they were respectful to me because they loved the dental program. We were trying to raise the accountability of this physician who was from the community, and it was at that meeting that I had the confrontation with this city councilor who was known to carry a gun. I was objective and factual, and he was subjective and emotional. I didn't think I was going to walk out of there alive. We were finally successful. The medical director resigned and we were able to turn that health center

around over a number of years.

Being a city dental director has many challenges and battles, as it is on the local level where the rubber meets the road. We didn't always win, but we always made our best efforts to serve the public with persistence and patience. I believe this is very important to succeed in the public arena and in life. To quote Nelson Mandela,

If our expectations are not realized,  
then we should bear in mind  
the greatest glory of living  
lies not in never falling,  
but in rising every time you fall.

I want to thank my many co-workers over the years, including Helene Bednarsh, Celeste Cruthird, and Charles Bradshaw, with whom I now work, and the different secretaries and staff over the years who helped make a dramatic impact in improving the oral health of Boston's residents. They have all been marvelous in terms of helping us reach our goals. Our department's administration has also been very considerate with me in terms of my involvement in improving oral health on the national level.

#### Thanks to My Family

I want to give a special thanks to my six children for being so patient and understanding. I am very proud of them. They have all gone through the Boston public school system, which is a challenge in itself. My oldest child, Myron III, aged 21, couldn't be here today because he had a wrestling tournament this weekend in which he took second, and a physical chemistry examination tomorrow at Wesleyan College, where he is a junior. My daughter Kristin, aged 19, came here yesterday by bus from Dartmouth College, where she is a junior. Three buses and 14 hours of travel. I really appreciate her making that extra effort. Last Friday my daughter Alison, aged 18, was elected vice-president of the senior class at Boston Latin School, where she is co-captain of the soccer team and plays varsity basketball and softball. Next fall she will be a freshman at Bowdoin College. She had a major event at school today, but after a little coaxing she came with us, and I am pleased that she came to share this evening with me and you. She is not as pleased as I am, but I'm very pleased that she is here. My son Jason, aged 16

and a tenth grader, had perfect attendance at Boston Latin School up until this week, but I think we can obtain excused absences. He is the co-captain of the JV soccer team and also on the varsity wrestling team. My daughter Alexandra, aged 14, is an eighth grader at Boston Latin School. She was named Sports Girl of the Year by the Women's Sports Foundation in 1997. As a seventh grader she was the leading scorer on the JV basketball team at Boston Latin School, and this year she is a co-captain. And last, but not least, Nathan, a sixth grader, is a great athlete—the leading scorer on his soccer team—and an excellent student with many A+'s. We came to Washington last Saturday by car. It was an eight-hour drive and there were times I wasn't sure I would continue bringing all of them. They are always a constant challenge. If they could please stand and everybody give them a round of applause. Thank you.

Next I want to thank my wife, Ruth. Usually when you see me at meetings I am Ruth-less, but Ruth is with me here today. We met in my first public health position at a neighborhood health center. My wife has been working for the last five years as a school nurse and for the first four of those years, she worked at a school that had the most medically compromised children in the city of Boston. These were 20-year-old kids with the minds of 3-year-olds who are tube fed, have seizures, and wear diapers. A very tough job. After her first day in this setting she said to me that we are so lucky that our children are so healthy and they can think for themselves and do things. She turned that program around. Two weeks ago she received an award from the Massachusetts School Health Nurses Association for being the most conscientious nurse in Massachusetts. When she accepted the award, she said she was at a loss for words, as many of her children are, as they are not able to verbalize their thoughts.

One day she came home to tell me of one of her accomplishments. She had taught a 19-year-old retarded child how to use a spoon to eat food. In 19 years, this child's mother had never been able to teach her child to eat with a spoon. For my wife, and that child and family, this was a major accomplishment. We often don't appreciate what we have in life and that's

what makes public health so special, as we do appreciate the quality of life for society. My wife Ruth has been my most severe critic, my strongest supporter, my closest advisor, and my chief consultant extraordinaire. She also has an MPH from Michigan University, but we don't hold that against her. In addition, she is obviously the mother of our six children. If my wife, Ruth, could stand, please, thank you very much. If it weren't for her, I couldn't be coming to all of these meetings and working with you to improve the public's health.

### **A Mid-career Knutson Awardee**

Although I knew John Knutson, I never knew him well. But we did have a chance to talk several times at national meetings. When I looked over the list of the other recipients of the Knutson Award, I saw a group of very distinguished individuals and it is a humbling experience to be added to this list. However, I noticed that most of them were at the end of their careers when they received the award. I am probably the first recipient to be in the middle of his career, thanks to my six children. The first two children are in college now and next year there will be three. At one point, if they go to graduate schools, as we expect, I will have five children in college at the same time, and the youngest is only 12 years old. So I'm just in the middle of my career and I plan to be around for awhile. I wanted you to know that, because we'll be working together for many years in the future.

### **Thanks to My Parents and the Early Years**

The two people who instilled in me the core values I have are my parents, and I am deeply indebted to them. My father, who passed away in 1994, 10 days short of 102 years of age, came to this country in 1912 at the age of 19 from Turkish Armenia with just twenty dollars in his pocket right before the Armenian genocide. After being here for 15 years he went back to find a wife, and that was my mother, who was 17 years younger. They came from a small village and lived a simple, honest life. I was brought up in the South End of Boston, which was the only mixed neighborhood in the city at that time. It was one of the city's poorer neighborhoods and we had many homeless people—then called

drunks, bums, and hobos—who were always lying on the street or sleeping wherever they could. As a child, I used to have conversations with them, and I was amazed at the quality of the lives they once had and then something went wrong. Everything fell apart and they became alcoholics or homeless. At that time alcohol was the major chemical of abuse. They were always nice people and very nice to me. I learned very young in life that “people were people” irrespective of color, education, religion, work, ethnicity, or income.

When I was about 14 or 15, one of my friends who lived across the street was playing Russian roulette and killed himself accidentally. Another friend was killed when I was about age 7 when someone threw a skylight off a roof that hit him at the city dump where we used to play. Another friend was completely edentulous at the age of 16 because he had “bad” teeth. The South End was a pretty tough neighborhood at that time, where very few went to or finished high school. The fact that I went to a good high school, Boston Latin School, the oldest public school in the country, founded in 1635, and then off to college was primarily a result of my family and the values that I learned from them. There were many temptations in the neighborhood not to get an education, as you were considered a geek or a nerd in today's terms if you went to high school or college. No one went to college in that neighborhood that I know of. But because of my parents and my older sister, I learned to walk the straight and narrow and every time there was a temptation, their values would draw me back.

When I went to Tufts College, I didn't consider myself to be poor. Because to me, to be poor meant that you didn't have food, you didn't have heat, or a place to sleep, and you didn't have clean clothes. I considered the bums and homeless people to be poor. I thought I was well off because we always had food on the table—my father owned a small grocery store. When I went to college, I didn't apply for a scholarship because I thought scholarships were for poor kids. I joined a fraternity to learn more about college life, as I commuted because I couldn't afford to live at school. One day one of my college friends who had a car and whom I considered to be rich, told me

he was receiving another scholarship because he was low income. I said to myself if he's low income, what am I? I then applied for scholarships and received them. My perspective on life was very different from that of my fellow college students.

When I finished college, one of my cousins who had come here from Syria also graduated from MIT. He offered to take me to California with him if I helped with the driving. I always wanted to see California, and especially to visit Muscle Beach. This was the summer of 1960 and he was offered a position in a new small company in Palo Alto called HP (Hewlett-Packard). I had planned to visit Southern California for only a week or two, but stayed the whole summer. I loved Muscle Beach because I had done gymnastics most of my life, and at Muscle Beach I learned many new moves—gymnastic moves, that is. I taught many people how to juggle, and I tried to get into the motion picture and night club business. I lived on thirty dollars for three months. I know what it is like to be hungry and not to have a place to sleep. Fortunately, a UCLA fraternity let me sleep in one of their rooms. This is a great country. When I was very hungry, I would go into a supermarket, dressed in a jacket and a tie, and feed myself as I walked around. I had applied to a number of dental schools and was on several waiting lists, but had heard nothing, so I kept looking for work.

In early September 1960, I received a telegram from my parents stating that the dean of the University of Pennsylvania Dental School wanted to talk to me. So I called and it was Dean Lester Burket, who asked me if I wanted to go to dental school. I said to myself if the dean could see what I look like right now, that would be the last thing he would offer me. I had long hair, a goatee and raggedy clothes. I looked like I was a homeless person. He said, “Be here within two days.” So I went to my friends at the beach and asked to borrow some money to take a plane back to Boston to go to dental school. No one believed me. I even had troubling believing it, but I viewed this as a learning experience. I was always interested in how the body works, and thought that learning some biochemistry and gross anatomy might be interesting. I wasn't sure how I'd feel about working in

people's mouths, but I thought that I'd try it.

I enjoyed dental school and learning new skills and knowledge. After dental school, I ended up with the Marines in Vietnam, but that's a story unto itself. My cousin, who took me to California with him, is now quite successful as president and CEO of Silicon Valley Group, Inc., a multinational company that makes machines that make computer chips.

### **Vietnam, Dr. James Dunning, and Public Health**

In Vietnam, I was stationed as a dentist at the 3rd Marine Division Field Hospital outside of Danang. All the wounded marines were sent here first and we often had mass casualties. Probably the greatest impression that was made on me professionally up to my duty in Vietnam, other than the horrors of the Vietnam war, was providing care for the orphans and children in Vietnam. If it weren't for what we did, they would have suffered with pain and infection and had no care at all. It was exciting work. At the Buddhist orphanage they would sing a thank you song at the end of the day. I said to myself this is what I want to do with the rest of my life, as long as I am fed and clothed, to provide health services to people that no one else is willing [to serve] or interested in serving. I found it very enriching personally and professionally to serve others. I didn't view it as work, but a privilege and an honor. As Confucius said, "Choose a job you love, and you'll never have to work a day in your life."

When I came back to the United States in 1966, a friend of mine, Dr. Robert Fasciano, suggested that I speak to Dr. James M. Dunning, whom I didn't know. When I met with Dr. Dunning, he said, "Why don't you go into dental public health?" I said, "What is that?" I ended up in his three-year program and I couldn't have asked for a better role model. Dr. Dunning had very high standards, with impeccable integrity and dignity. He was very factual and very scientific in his approach to problem solving, with sensitivity and compassion for those in need. Given the difference in his upbringing as a Yankee and mine in the South End, one would think we would interact like oil and water, but we got along like bread and butter or hand in glove. We were a fantastic



*Dr. James Dunning and Dr. Myron Allukian, Jr., 1969*

team and he was a fantastic mentor.

I didn't realize until recently how he became so involved with fluoridation. In 1951, the dean of the Harvard Dental School invited Dr. John Knutson to the Harvard Dental School to talk to the faculty about "new fluoride therapies" that were being tested. Dr. Knutson spoke primarily about the Grand Rapids study and fluoridation, and the dean at Harvard realized that fluoridation should be a priority instead of fluoride therapy. The dean of Harvard at that time was Dr. James M. Dunning. I had written a comprehensive paper on fluoridation at the School of Public Health and as a result of it, I was asked by the Massachusetts Citizens' Committee for Dental Health to speak in some communities considering fluoridation. I ended up traveling the whole state promoting fluoridation and then through a grassroots organizational effort we were able to have the state law changed so it was easier to fluoridate a community. Dr. Dunning was the chief consultant and one of the leaders behind this initiative and the Citizens' Committee.

Another program that was very exciting and that I did during my residency while I was at Harvard was to set up a dental assistant training program for disadvantaged women. We had five black women and one white woman. No one had ever done this before at Harvard. They had limited education and some were not even high school graduates. One of the staff

said to me, "You're not going to let them put their hands in peoples mouths, are you?" I thought, wow, what barriers we have to work with here. The program was so successful that Dr. Paul Goldhaber, the dean, continued the program with new funding for many years. One of the first dental assistant graduates of that program worked at Harvard for 25 years and was always very highly thought of by the students and staff.

### **Life is a Gift—Live It Well**

In my various life experiences, I have learned over and over again that life is very fragile. We live for 60, 70, 80, or 90 years. We die or have compromised lives, from diseases, disabilities, and/or accidents. If you were to learn tonight that you only have a month or a week or a day to live, what would you pay or do to extend your life by another day, week, or month? Each day of life or health that we have is a gift. Unfortunately, most people don't appreciate or realize it until they lose it. I began working with people with HIV/AIDS around 1984, because the calls kept coming in to my office since they couldn't get dental care. We did many workshops for dental providers, trying to convince them to treat people with AIDS. At that time HIV was a death sentence. The thing that impressed me most about people with AIDS/HIV was how honest they were in their attitudes, beliefs, and feelings. They tried to live as full a life

as possible, day by day, minute by minute, because they knew that they did not have that much more time to live.

I believe all of us should make the most of our lives the best we can. To live the fullest life we can. To serve as many people as we can, and to be nice and loving to as many people as we can. We are all one big family. I still look forward to going to work every morning and I still have trouble leaving every day, because I love what I do. I love the work I do. I may give some of you a hard time every so often, but we all have the same goal, to do the best we can to improve the health of

the people of our communities and our country, and people around the world. As Maya Angelou has said,

At our best level of existence,  
We are part of a family, and  
At our highest level of  
achievement,  
We work to keep the family alive.

In closing, I want to thank you. This award is not for me. This award is really for all of you and what you represent. I am just a symbol or reflection of our work. As Alfred Tennyson once said, "I am a part of all/That I have met." All the accomplishments we had

with colleagues and students were so that people could get services and have a better quality of life. Let's continue to make the most of what we have and do the best we can, every day, for our family. Thank you all very much.

You give but little  
when you give of  
your possessions.  
It is when you  
give of yourself  
that you truly give.  
—Kahlil Gibran

## Call for Abstracts

2000 Annual Session

American Association of Public Health Dentistry

April 30 - May 3, 2000

Chicago, IL

### Theme: Coming Together for the New Millennium

The American Association of Public Health Dentistry invites papers on a broad range of dental public health topics for presentation at its 63<sup>rd</sup> Annual Session to be held jointly with the Association of State and Territorial Dental Directors. This year's theme, "**Coming Together for the New Millennium**," places emphasis on how the health of the public is enhanced through our service, education and research efforts. The Association is interested in having presentations that reflect both national and international perspectives and address issues of diversity.

Major topics include: science-based and evidence-based approaches to health promotion; disease prevention and management; utilization of care; delivery systems; cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness of programs; surveillance and epidemiology; health policies; knowledge, attitudes and practices of the public and the profession; and education of health personnel, the public, and policy makers.

Abstracts will be evaluated and selected on the following criteria: significance, timeliness, originality and quality of writing, study design, and supporting data. The abstract should be submitted with the understanding that it has not been presented at another meeting or previously published. Acceptance of the abstract requires that the primary author present the paper/poster at the Annual Session. Each person may present only one paper/poster although individuals may be co-authors on more than one paper/poster.

The deadline for submission is December 1, 1999. For a copy of the abstract form or further information, please view the 63<sup>rd</sup> Annual Meeting information on the AAPHD web site at [www.aaphd.org](http://www.aaphd.org) or write or call:

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