

# State of the Academy Presidential Address 4th Scientific Conference - Sedona, AZ

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Good evening, everyone. I am Robert J. McDermott, President of the American Academy of Health Behavior. It is my pleasure tonight to welcome you to our Fourth Scientific Conference in this incredible venue of Sedona, Arizona. I thought I would begin by telling a couple of true stories about myself. Because this year is a Presidential election year and one for becoming enmeshed in national politics, I derive some of my entertainment by watching the Sunday morning news shows and the pundits that quiz the candidates concerning their postures on various issues. Often it feels as if one doesn't get much "truth" from these people, so I thought that the truth might be refreshing.

You know, as a teenager in 1967, I gave my first speech in public to what you might call a *real* audience, as part of an oratorical contest sponsored by Optimists International. As a result of that contest, I was offered a scholarship to study public speaking. My interests being in a slightly different area at the time, I turned down *that* scholarship. Several years later, I was invited to join Toastmasters International, which, as many of you know, is an organization where people learn to lose their nervousness, lose their fear of public speaking, learn to be effective communicators, and acquire an ability to say things to others that are motivational. But, like most of you, I am time challenged, and so my participation never quite materialized. As I stand here looking out at you tonight behind this podium, I am thinking that those were 2 of the *really* bad decisions I ever made.

My stage fright notwithstanding, it is my role to do 3 things tonight. The first is to "check you in" physically, mentally, emotionally, and intellectually to this conference, the most diverse program we have had in our short history and, perhaps, the best. However, you will all have to be the judge of the quality of the next few days after you experience our program. Tonight, though, we launch our 4-day celebration of research achievements and the advancement of knowledge in a style that uniquely belongs to the Academy.

My second task tonight is to review the year's Academy highlights and achievements. This year has gone by quickly, but during it, the Academy has had some unprecedented accomplishments. I will get to those a little later.

The third thing I get to do tonight is to recognize some unselfish individuals who have donated their time and their energy to give this Academy a foundation for greatness and who have provided you with rare opportunity to hear state-of-the-art research from the artists who have sculpted it.

I am *not* called upon tonight to provide a talk that offers enormous intellectual substance. Fortunately, for me, and even more fortunately for you, we have a tremendously talented and gifted keynote speaker tonight who will offer to all of us *that* high note, the University of Minnesota's Dr Cheryl L. Perry.

Before getting to the year's accomplishments, please let me remind you of some of the specific reasons we are here. Monday's opening session brings us 3

perspectives on promising interventions to reduce tobacco use. The day's second plenary session comprises 3 illustrations of behavioral science applied to injury prevention. On our version of "Super Tuesday" we will have the opportunity to hear from individuals who provide cutting-edge research about adolescent health decision making as it relates to brain development, psychosocial maturity, and parental influence. On the second half of Tuesday morning, I have the privilege of moderating an interactive panel discussion on future directions in health behavior research that includes each of the Academy's first 4 Research Laureate recipients, the first event of its kind at the Academy's scientific conference. I hope that it becomes an annual tradition. Wednesday, our focus moves to emerging issues in health behavior research from an international perspective. The conference closes Wednesday with the Inaugural Address of the incoming Academy President, Dr Mohammad R. Torabi. Interspersed with these plenary events are morning roundtable discussions, daily poster presentations, and afternoon professional development workshops. Please invest your time in as many of these events as possible.

### **What We Have Accomplished**

Let me turn to the year in review. Indeed, what have we accomplished as an organization since last we gathered for a scientific conference?

- Inasmuch as professional development and mentoring of young researchers is a tenet of the Academy, under the leadership of Dr Dennis Thombs and a cadre of Academy members, we created a white paper on research competencies for doctoral education. This paper has undergone preliminary review and comment, and presently, it is being revised for publication in the *American Journal of Health Behavior*, the official publication of the Academy. These competencies are, in fact, the subject of Tuesday afternoon's professional development session.
- Spearheaded by Dr Mohammad Torabi, the Academy Board of Directors drafted a strategic plan for the Academy to become both influential and prosperous. This plan, when completed, will advance the Academy's vision, mission, and values for years to come.
- The Academy's first promotional brochure was completed under the direction of Dr Bradley Boekeloo and was approved for dissemination by the Academy's Board of Directors. It concisely states the Academy's origins and organizational objectives and should help to clarify these things for other professionals and professional groups.
- The Academy became an active partner in the Coalition of National Health Education Organizations (CNHEO), a coalition comprised of professional associations whose collective mission is to advance health education and promotion. This admission to the CNHEO completed an initiative launched by my predecessor, Dr Chudley Werch. As President of the Academy, I represented us as a member of a panel at the national meeting of the Society for Public Health Education last November in San Francisco. For many audience participants, hearing about the AAHB through this panel discussion was their first introduction to the Academy. The Academy is now represented also in the monthly CNHEO teleconference calls.
- During 2003-2004, the Academy Board of Directors approved the creation of the Judy and Randy Black Scholarship in honor of the late Judy Black, and Randy Black, Founding Member and Fellow of the American Academy of Health Behavior. The scholarship promotes excellence in research achievement by a young professional through facilitating travel to the AAHB Scientific Conference to present a paper that has been rigorously judged in a competition by a panel of reviewers. The first conferring of this scholarship is expected to occur at the 2005 conference.
- Fund-raising for the Academy resulted in donations of \$8715, including \$3500 for the Judy and Randy Black Scholarship and \$2000 raised through the President's Board of Directors initiative.
- Three of 4 of the Academy's bylaws proposed for change were approved this past year by vote of the general Academy membership through electronic ballot. One bylaw change deleted the "Associate Member" category of membership. A second modified the name of one of the Academy's permanent councils. A third added the annual

conference's Program Chair to the Board of Directors.

- In the general election of officers this past November, Dr Karen Liller was elected to the Board of Directors as a Delegate, and Dr Randy Black was chosen President-elect. These individuals assume their offices at the close of this scientific conference.
- The Academy launched a newsletter this year that updates members on member activities and their various accolades.
- The Academy Board of Directors confirmed the selection of Charleston, South Carolina, as the site of the 2005 scientific conference, but selected not to hold the 2006 conference in San Antonio, Texas.
- The Academy now has more than 130 members. We added 11 new members this year, including 6 women and 5 men. Among our members are 39 Fellows, including our solitary new Fellow of 2003, the University of Maryland's Dr Min Qi Wang, who could not be here, but whom I would like to recognize for achieving this career milestone.
- Moving on with our achievements, one of our officers, Dr Michael E. Young, and his wife gave birth to a baby shortly after our last gathering, and last, but certainly not least in terms of achievements, 2 of our members, including the Academy's founder, we believe conceived a daughter at last year's scientific conference. The child, Paris Nicole Glover, was born in December; our conference was in March; you do the math! It seems that even after giving up most of his formal role in the Academy, Glover stills wants us all to know he is no less the "founding father." Congratulations and best wishes to E. D. and Penny!

### **Recognition of the Board**

At this point I would like to recognize members of the Academy Board of Directors for 2003-04 that "moved the needle" for us as an organization. Please stand when I call your name:

- Dr Bradley Boekeloo, Publications and Communications Chair
- Dr Bruce Simons-Morton, Resource Development and Public Policy Council Chair
- Dr Lori Turner, Membership and Development Chair
- Dr Dennis Thombs, Professional De-

velopment Council Chair

- Dr Mary Dinger, Treasurer and Finance Committee Chair
- Dr Karen Liller, Program Chair for Sedona
- Dr Virginia Noland, Abstract Chair for Sedona
- Dr John Sciacca and Dr. Julie Baldwin, Conference Co-Chairs for Sedona
- Dr Cheryl Dye, Delegate
- Dr Robert Valois, Delegate
- Dr Mary Nies, Delegate
- Dr Michael Young, Secretary
- Dr Mohammad Torabi, President-elect and Strategic Planning Committee Chair
- Dr Chudley Werch, Immediate Past President
- Dr Randy Black, New President-elect
- Dr Terri Manning, Executive Director

At this time I would like to request that Dr Karen Liller, Dr Cheryl Dye, and Dr Chudley Werch come forward to receive special recognition, because after years of service, each is rotating off the Board (although Dr Liller will be rotating back to the Board in the position of Delegate-at-Large). In addition, I would like for Dr Virginia Noland, Dr John Sciacca, and Dr Julie Baldwin to approach the podium.

Dr Liller has worked on the program preparation for Sedona even prior to our holding the scientific conference of 2003 in St. Augustine. Thank you for your excellent dedication to duty, and please accept this gift as a token of our appreciation.

Dr Cheryl Dye has served the Academy diligently in the role of Delegate-at-Large and the Board will miss her presence. Please accept this award and our sincere thanks for your thoughtful contributions, attention to detail, and warmth of spirit.

Underneath this gift wrap, the Academy has modest tokens of appreciation for John Sciacca and Julie Baldwin, who assisted the program planning committee in identifying for all of you the best that Arizona and the Sedona area have to offer. In addition, there is a token of our appreciation presented to Dr Virginia Noland, who stepped in to oversee the abstract review and selection process for this year's scientific conference.

Finally, I want to offer a special thanks and gratitude to Dr Chudley Werch, who has been with the Board of Directors in one capacity or another since its inception. He organized and hosted the first

meeting ever of the Board, served as the Academy's second President, and as anyone who works with him or knows him will tell you, is a man whose word is a promise that is always fulfilled. He is a skilled and careful researcher, an individual respected by his colleagues and co-workers, honored with the title of distinguished professor by his home university, and I am proud to say, a friend since our days in graduate school at the University of Wisconsin. Chudley, thank you for your many years of unselfish service to, and on behalf of, the Academy.

### **The Challenges That Lie Ahead**

Before closing this portion of tonight's program, I cannot help but think about some of the challenges that lie ahead of us. I want to remind you of something I said last year when I addressed this assembly.<sup>1</sup> I indicated then that successful organizations achieve and sustain success for a series of reasons. I identified 7 then but will remind you tonight of only 3 of them that are especially challenging.

First, *organizations thrive because they do the little things right – that is, they get the details right.* Put another way, they do those little things that make all the difference in the world between what is "good" but ordinary and what is truly excellent.

Second, *they succeed because they make a commitment to excellence.* The Academy must embrace standards of excellence for its membership that are second to none. An organization that is founded on the principle of *meritocracy* must always challenge itself to become better and stronger and resist any temptation to lower the bar or dilute its standards.

Third, *successful organizations have disciplined leadership and disciplined membership.* We are a small organization, and we grow slowly. Because we have distinct requirements for the Academy, we may *never* become a large organization. A notable person from another professional organization said to me just about a month ago that she thought the Academy would never really be very influential because it is so small and that today's reality is that size means power and influence. I told her I thought it was a matter of perspective, not fact. A few days later I was reminded of a story I was once told about the brilliant artist Pablo Picasso. As everyone knows, Picasso was a versatile

artist. He developed Cubism only after he had become successful as a traditional artist. As the story goes, during a display of his works, a critic called into question the meaning and influence of one of his productions, in this case, a portrait of a young woman, but a portrait, of course, in Picasso's unique style of odd and unusual proportions and dimensions. "Picasso," the critic said, "your portrait is without taste, it is too avant-garde, and it will *never* influence anyone. It simply *isn't reality.*" To impress his meaning further upon Picasso, he withdrew his wallet and took out a portrait-type photo of his wife. Giving the photo to Picasso, he remarked: "Now *this* woman, my wife, *this* is beauty, *this* is reality." Allegedly, Picasso examined the photo briefly, held it up in the air and retorted: "Isn't she small?"

Size and influence *are* a matter of perspective. As I close my year as President of the Academy, I still see this organization as one on a *journey* and in the midst of an *adventure.*<sup>1</sup> I am proud of my affiliation with it. I forecast success for the Academy, at least in part, because of its unique perspective. It is our strength, our forte, and I hope that that uniqueness stays with us for a long time.

Lastly, I would like to thank my wife, Kay, and my colleagues and dear friends at the University of South Florida who have encouraged me, and applauded my year as President of the Academy. As many of you know, the Academy's Board of Directors was right here in Sedona on September 11, 2001, when our country was attacked by forces of terror. The memory of that day and the magnificence of the solidarity of our Academy group are memories that will never leave me. Although tonight is a night when we award and congratulate, and even self-aggrandize some, the memory of our last visit here should be a reminder that it is the precious friends and loved ones that are what should really matter to us the most.

### **Introduction of Dr John Elder**

Before stepping away from the microphone, it is my further pleasure to introduce an exceptional individual and last year's recipient of the AAHB Research Laureate Medallion, Dr John Elder.

Dr Elder is Professor of Health Promotion, at the San Diego State Graduate School of Public Health, and an adjunct professor of pediatrics at the University of

California-San Diego. A native Nebraskan, he received a BA degree in Psychology from the University of Nebraska, and later, earned MA and PhD degrees in clinical psychology from West Virginia University. Subsequently, Dr Elder completed the MPH at Boston University, specializing in international health. He took on the post of Intervention Director in the highly acclaimed Pawtucket Heart Health Study until 1984, in addition, serving part of that interval as assistant professor of community medicine at nearby Brown University. From the mid-1980s through the mid-1990s, Dr Elder capitalized on his professional public health training in global affairs by becoming the Senior Technical Advisor for the Health Communications for Child Survival (HEALTHCOM) Project, under the sponsorship of USAID and the Academy for Educational Development. This set of activities brought

him to such unique locations as Indonesia, New Guinea, Honduras, Guatemala, Ecuador, and Yemen – actually more than 20 countries in all as a consultant. He is a skilled and prolific writer, having authored at least 3 books and 225 other publications in the areas of health promotion, disease prevention, and behavioral epidemiology. For over a quarter of a century, Dr Elder has been a champion of research and teaching, of international health programs, and of overall excellence in scholarship. It is my great pleasure to introduce Dr John P. Elder, who will in turn, introduce tonight's keynote presenter. ■

#### REFERENCE

1. McDermott RJ. The American Academy of Health Behavior: a *journey* and an *adventure*. *Am J Health Behav.* 2003;27(Suppl 3):S273-S276.