



Thanks to the extraordinary commitment and expertise of AHLA leaders, the American Health Lawyers Association continues to thrive and serve as the essential health law resource in the nation. The Association's strong foundation reflects a history that is vibrant, meaningful and worth sharing. Finding a way to preserve AHLA's history was especially relevant in light of the Association's 50th Anniversary, which was celebrated throughout 2017.

This transcript reflects a conversation between AHLA leaders that was conducted via audio interview as part of the Association's History Project. More than 60 of AHLA's Fellows and Past Presidents were interviewed. A video documentary was also prepared and debuted on June 26 during AHLA's 2017 Annual Meeting in San Francisco, CA.

March 10, 2017

Gary Scott Davis interviewing Almeta Cooper:

Gary: Almeta has the distinction and honor of being one of the association's past presidents. We'll start before your presidency. Can you talk a little bit about how you first got involved with the association?

Almeta: Gary, when I began being involved it was through the academy and at that time the first thing that young lawyers did in terms of serving the association was to present table topics. Those were done in the morning of the annual meeting. There were a large number of table topics and people just developed a short outline and guided a discussion. That was the very first thing I ever did as a matter of service to the association.

Then before that I was lucky enough as a young lawyer to have my leaders, the General Counsel and the Deputy General Counsel up the AMA, the American Medical Association, encouraged me to become involved and to attend the meetings. That was a big step, just having a support of Bernie Hershue was the General Counsel and Betty Jane Anderson who was the Deputy General Counsel.

Gary: I'm sorry. My apologies to the transcriber. I was on mute there.

Almeta: Oh. That's okay.

Gary: My bad. You had mentioned the fact that you had started with the academy. This is really a brilliant question. It's too bad it was missed the first time. You started with the Academy and the Academy and the National Health Lawyer's Association merged together to form what is today the American Health Lawyer's Association. Can you talk a little bit about how over the decade's time the merger and then the growth of the association has affected participation by its members?

Almeta: Well, first of all I have to admire the foresight of some of my colleagues at the time who had the foresight to see that it just made so much sense to have the two organizations merge. At the time many people were involved with both organizations and there was a lot of overlap. One of the things I think that made the outcome of that merger is that I think we managed to take the best of both organizations and make it even stronger.

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I think that when I think about it that's what I really think about. It was interesting because I was on the board of the academy at the time of the merger and was actually the last person from that combined board to rotate off because I became president of the association in 2003-2004. I got an opportunity to both be there at the beginning and through the early transition.

Gary: Before we talk a little bit about your presidency, there are some vintage concepts or activities from the merger days. For example SISLIC. Can you talk a little bit about what a SISLIC is for the newer members who are listening to this archived program and think it's a foreign language?

Almeta: Well, I can't actually remember the complete acronym, but it was something like special subject committees or whatnot. People gathered around topics to be able to share ideas, to have conference calls on specific topics. Now we sort of take it for granted that we're going to have electronic webinars and remote continuing legal education, but at the time, that was considered a radically new concept. We debated over it and deliberated over whether it was going to be an accessible way for people to get information, how helpful it was going to be.

Apparently as we now know it's turned out to be a great idea because I think many people, that is their primary source of education to get on a conference all or a webinar and hear the latest on a hot topic. Now what we were the SISLIC eventually evolved into practice groups and have a much greater part and structure as a part of the AHLA.

Gary: As president, what would you identify as your proudest accomplishment?

Almeta: Well, there were a couple of things that occurred while I was president. One, we worked on the strategic plan. We were very focused at that time on being fiscally responsible and solvent and having reserves to make sure that we could weather hard times. We were able to do that. I think the other thing that I'm just personally pleased about is that I was the person who appointed Beth Schermer to be one of the people doing the year in review. She did such a tremendous job and it was so welcomed by the membership that that's one of the things that I'm particular pleased about.

I think the other thing that I feel like I had the opportunity to do when I was president was to really promote and support diversity of ideas. As an African-American woman I appreciate diversity in general, but I think one of the things that's really important to the association is that we really welcome ideas from all parts of the healthcare community whether individuals are representing physicians or hospitals or managed care associations or whatever part of that is because all of those different perspectives makes the entire organization richer. I think it also really helps the members in terms of being exposed to those ideas in an environment and in a place where you can hear what the other side is saying. That's one of the reasons why if you look at the programming that we often would have government speakers to give our members a full 360 of any particular issue.

Gary: Focusing a little bit on diversity, which is I think much to the credit of the association always been in the forefront of its activities, can you talk about where the association has been, where it is now and where you think it should go in terms of continuing to further promote and enhance its diversity initiatives?

Almeta: Well, one of the things that is really positive I think is when I was a young lawyer and would come to the annual meetings in particular, I believe that there were five regular African-American healthcare lawyers who would be attending those meetings. Brent Henry, Ed

Robinson, Yvonne Bryant, Gail Hasbrouk when I first started going to meetings. Obviously that group has expanded much more than that today.

I think it's also been very positive that we've taken the leadership and had a focus on diversity, which actually a lot of that, the more formalized programs and structure happened initially under Dick Cowarti's presidency. He was the year behind me. Again, I think it relates to what I was saying earlier about the diversity of ideas and just the general diversity of the association makes it more robust and more vibrant. I'm really pleased that we continue to be committed to being inclusive.

Gary: In terms of being inclusive, can you talk a little bit about your experience and your perception about the initiatives over time with the association to ensure that healthcare lawyers from all different types of practices, government, small firm, large firm, have opportunities within the association?

Almeta: Yes. When I was president, that was during the time that there was really a lot of conversations around whether healthcare lawyers who were in small firms or practicing solo could really become a part of and be recognized through the association because quite honestly there was a perception that you had to be in a large organization, that you had to be in a big law firm in order to have the opportunity to take advantage of this speaking and writing and kind of getting that exposure within the association.

I think because individual board members and presidents and leaders really were committed to saying we want to have people from these different backgrounds and exposure in healthcare on our board. We want, myself, when I was president of the association, I was the General Counsel of the Ohio State Medical Association, which we had in my association we had two healthcare lawyers.

Just by people being able to see that it was possible to come from a smaller organization to be a part of the leadership and being able to see as long as you're willing to contribute and do the work and help with what needed to be done, be on program committees or speaker, a contributor in any way, then I think that that has allowed the association to have the benefit of those contributions. For people to really feel included I think is very, very important.

Gary: Over time you talked about the association's efforts in diversity. How are those efforts affected both for women and for minorities their participation not only in the association, but within the health law bar generally?

Almeta: Well, one of the things that we have done and there have been a group of women who have had the Women's Law Institute to promote and help with women developing leadership roles within healthcare generally and within the association. I think also through our mentorship programs where we really try to reach out to young healthcare lawyers and help them navigate becoming a healthcare lawyer, those are some of the things that we've done.

Really I think kind of as it is in the employer sector, because the leadership continues through its publications and through what we do to clearly communicate the commitment of the association, that's what has made a difference to the members and for people to feel that the association is welcoming and that they can be a part of it. Really that just ongoing commitment of the association leaders I think has made a big difference.

Gary: In addition to having the distinction of having served as the president of the organization, you're also one of a very few number of members who are the recipient of the David J. Greenburg Award. Can you talk a little bit both about the award and about David?

Almeta: Well, I think there isn't, as an individual it was such an incredible honor to receive the David J. Greenburg Award. When I had looked at past recipients and subsequent recipients of the award it really is just incredible some of the contributions and what leaders some of the folks are who have received the award have been.

David, again sometimes it's hard for people to think now when you see the size of the organization, we have 12,000 members, there was a time and I heard people say when the whole group of health lawyers could fit into David J. Greenburg's apartment. That's kind of mind boggling when you see where we are now. I never really got to, I really did not get to know David myself, although I have quite a few peers and colleagues who knew him very, very well, but I think that what he symbolized in terms of his just commitment and his belief in what was in the embryonic field of healthcare law is something, it's hard to even imagine now for someone to have that vision and leadership.

I think all of us are so thankful for what he did and the fact that when I talked to other peers of mine who were young lawyers at the time that he was developing and working with the National Health Lawyers in particular, he was very giving and very supportive and brought along young lawyers, which is something that we have to continue to do for the vitality of the association because one of the benchmarks of healthcare is that it's always changing. We have to change and adapt and make sure that we're making a pathway for younger lawyers to want to come into this area and to have the kinds of wonderful careers and opportunities that I've been able to have or you've been able to have.

Gary: I know that one of David's focuses was on education and creating and fostering and promoting an environment in which healthcare lawyers would share their knowledge with one another. AHLA continues in that tradition and I think is renowned for its ability to deliver timely information to its members. Can you talk about your experience growing up in the association and participating in that process of peer-to-peer education?

Almeta: Well, one of the things that I was fortunate to be able to do was to be on a variety of program planning committees, not only the annual meeting planning committee both as an individual lawyer and later in the process of being the president-elect, but I also had the opportunity to chair the Academic Medical Center's program and to be on the in-house counsel planning program as well as the physician's program which later became the Physicians and Hospital Law Institute.

When you have the opportunity to see the proposals, talk through them and think about what is going to be useful and helpful to the membership, it helps you really to think more critically in your own practice and also I think just makes you a better lawyer. Sometimes just by the way that you are positioned by being on one of those committees, you can really be very helpful to your colleagues.

One of the, the year that the National Practitioner Data Bank opened, at that time I was in the Office of the General Counsel of the American Medical Association and we were getting so many calls that I realized, I just had the advantage at that time of being on that national level and to kind of see what seemed to me to be a groundswell of concern on the part of physicians and

their legal counsel that at that time I went to the program planning committee. Even though it was after the time when topics were to be submitted, they were receptive to the fact that this change in terms of the National Practitioner Data Bank was going to be really huge for healthcare lawyers, that they allowed me to help plan a program.

It was actually given on Wednesday afternoon, the last session of the meeting. We had so many attendees they had to change it from a small room and into a ballroom and then they had to add more chairs. The thing about it is which was it was not just that we were able to, the process of the leadership being responsive to something that was important for members, but the fact that I think it continues today is that AHLA is always trying to be innovative and to be timely as you said Gary. That's just an example of that responsiveness.

It also gives people kind of the springboard or the impetus to be thinking creatively and how can we help our members and have that exchange. I think those are some of the best things that we do. As we started this conversation when we talked about the development of SISLIC which became the practice groups, we've always been trying to look at more effective ways to deliver the information and so it has over time evolved and it's going to continue to evolve.

Gary: As we're sitting here talking I think I remembered what SISLIC. I think it was special interest in substantive law interest committee.

Almeta: Oh, impressive Gary. You're absolutely right now that I hear you say it.

Gary: Yeah, so that can go down for posterity. Everybody will now know what SISLIC stands for.

Almeta: Exactly.

Gary: As we come close to the end of our time, and I very much appreciate you doing this on behalf of the association, a couple of more questions. The first one is if you were sitting down with either a young lawyer or even better, a young law student who was interested in becoming involved in healthcare law, what would you say to him or her?

Almeta: Well, one of the things that I always tell law students, and I tell young lawyers, is to become involved in AHLA, one because as smart as you may be you can be even better if you have the ability to interact with other people who have both your intellectual curiosity and questions and hopefully some answers about the questions that you're encountering, and the network of people that you meet and the wonderful both lawyers, as lawyers and as people over the years ...

I just as an aside would say for me personally it's the people in the American Health Lawyers Association has been so meaningful to me throughout my career. I have wonderful friends and colleagues and people to reach out to in situations where you need a subject matter expert. For a young lawyer I encourage them, it's good to spend time honing your craft, but just sitting at your desk or digging into your computer or however you're doing your work, that's not enough. You really need to have the benefit of getting both the content and the interpersonal development of being active in the association.

Gary: My last question, if you could ask yourself one question for this interview, what would that question be and what would the answer be?

Almeta: I've actually touched on it a bit already, but I think the one question would be why has AHLA been so important in my professional career? Again, I think it's because it has allowed me to be a better lawyer. When I've done either speaking or writing or whatever, it makes you a better lawyer because you want to do an excellent job for your peers.

I think just the opportunity to attend the meetings, meet the people, even to travel to some of the locations that the meetings go to and to create the memories with my colleagues and friends has really meant a great deal to me. I just feel really lucky to have been a healthcare lawyer because one of the great things about healthcare law is that it is dynamic. It is changing, but also as a general proposition it's a very collegial group. For me personally that's been very personally rewarding.