**My Story with AAGEN**

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**As 2010 quickly draws to an end with the holiday spirit high in the air, I have constantly reminded myself of a long overdue promise I made to write an article sharing with AAGEN members and friends about my inspiration and experience over the past years in serving and leading AAGEN. The ongoing transition work to turn over my responsibility as the Chair of AAGEN to the incoming leadership team has also presented a reflective moment for me to tell my story with AAGEN.**

**In composing my thoughts, it became clear to me that the underlying focus of this article was in line with several questions I received from time to time:**

* **Why did I join AAGEN?**
* **What made me become highly committed to AAGEN?**
* **What had AAGEN done for me?**

**My association with AAGEN goes back to 1997 when I was at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) as a GS-14 Information Technology specialist. When AAGEN was first introduced to me at a dinner event, the AAGEN Secretary greeted me and handed me a membership application form. Going over the form, I realized that I was not qualified to be a member because in 1997 only GS-15 or above were qualified to join AAGEN. Subconsciously I was relieved that I didn’t have to worry about paying the $60 membership fee. From that point on, I was invited to more AAGEN dinner events and I attended on and off. Still, taking a night away from home after work and paying the $15 dinner cost did raise a question in my mind: Why spend the time and money to attend optional events when it seemingly had very little to do with my career job or my family life?**

**My cultural background and my life-long education had made me a dedicated, quiet and stay-in-the-box specialist. At USDA, I was focused only on my professional career and I did what my supervisor told me to do. I was happy as long as my supervisor was happy. The thought of assuming more responsibilities and moving up the career ladder was indeed a goal of mine. However, the underlying assumption at that time was if I did a good job in my office, my career growth would be taken care of. That turned out to be a false assumption. There was much more for me to learn on top of my doctoral degree and my engineering expertise. However, very few leadership skills could be learned from my workplace because the usual office politics and turf wars restricted me to only stay within my own field of specialty. And my supervisor, as is very common, didn’t or couldn’t really care about where I would be three years or ten years down the road.**

**In late 1997, an AAGEN Executive Board member, who was also working at USDA, encouraged me to run for the president of the Asian Pacific American Network in Agriculture (APANA), an APA employee organization in USDA. Instinctively my stay-in-the-box nature raised discouraging questions: Why would I want to bother with APANA when I was already very busy with my own job in my office? Why should I get into something that I was not comfortable with?**

**At the urge of this AAGEN EB member, I reluctantly agreed to be nominated. Not surprisingly, I won the election because there was minimal competition and I became the APANA president of 1998. Predictably, a second term in 1999 was also bestowed upon me by my dear APANA members. In retrospect, the encouragement I received to step into a non-career challenge was actually an AAGEN mentoring moment at work, which led me on a journey from which I never turned back.**

**From the start as the president of APANA, I faced tough challenges. Among other things, I had to:**

* **Give public speeches, including being the master of ceremony for the annual USDA APA heritage month celebration.**
* **Meet the USDA Secretary to shore up support for the APANA programs.**
* **Meet face to face with agency heads to negotiate APANA issues and concerns.**
* **Lead and harmonize the multi-cultural APANA membership.**
* **Manage my time strategically to accommodate both my office work and the extra APANA workload.**

**Sleepless nights and nervous moments became constants in my daily experience.   I had frequent doubts ---what had I put myself into? However, looking back now, I realize that those challenges were indeed precious opportunities in building up my leadership skills, otherwise unavailable in my usual routine office responsibilities.**

**Throughout the early years at APANA, I continued to attend AAGEN events and enjoyed quite a few dinners as a guest of AAGEN. In return, I started to volunteer doing some short term tasks like tracking event attendee registrations or taking meeting notes. AAGEN provided me with unique opportunities to work side-by-side with many APA senior executives. They asked me to volunteer so they had to be nice to me. I, on the other hand, had the upper hand to closely watch them to see how they conduct productive meetings, give complex presentations, express diverse viewpoints, debate controversial issues, say no with a smile, build enduring consensus, make difficult compromises, derive innovative solutions, be political savvy, network with many people, and make hard things happen. They reached their SES positions with these skills and I got to observe them first hand. They did argue sometimes vigorously among themselves for the best interest of AAGEN. When that happened, it was very educational and entertaining for me to watch, observe and learn. Very soon, deep in my mind, they all became my mentors. In short my learning of leadership skills was initiated by AAGEN through the APANA experience, and then continued with AAGEN on and off in the late 1990’s and the early 2000’s.**

**In year 2000, I became a GS-15 by moving to another USDA agency. One of the first things I did was to pay my membership due as my GS-15 level qualified me to do so (Note: the AAGEN policy was changed thereafter to accept GS-14s or below with a nominal fee requirement).   In 2003, I reached the senior executive rank and started working at the Department of Labor (DOL). The short 3-year transition from GS-15 to SES opened up a new chapter of my career with a higher sense of purpose in mind to not only contribute my best as a public servant, but also to “give back” to my community and my APA colleagues what I had been given and rewarded over the years.**

**Many had asked me how I moved to the SES rank. That is a long story and it is out of the scope of this article. We can talk at some other place and time on how to move up the career ladder. I won’t charge you for the consultation. The experience with AAGEN and APANA certainly will be a part of the answers. Obviously the growth of my leadership skills and my career qualifications played an important role in impressing the selection officials and carrying me through the interviews and the resume presentations. However, there was another factor that I realized after joining DOL. I was told that I was the first career APA senior executive in DOL. What a surprise! It was then clear to me that the initiative under the then DOL Secretary Elaine Chao to promote APA career advancement in the government had indeed opened up a broader and deeper attention to the job candidate evaluation and decisions by the senior selection officials. As such, I believe I was at the right time and the right place when opportunity knocked on the door after years of tuning up my skills and qualifications. My advice to all is that never give up the learning of leadership skills and never stop applying for jobs. As the hurdles are numerous, be prepared to be disappointed, but maintain your perseverance and persistence. Somewhere down the road, opportunities are always waiting.**

**AAGEN has been an ideal arena for me to learn and practice my leadership skills. Yet without a doubt I had to contribute long hours and hard work to AAGEN as if it was my second paid job. Many people came to AAGEN asking: “What can AAGEN do for me?” This is a misguided premise. If one has reservations, the question ought to be: “What can I do to make AAGEN work for me?” When burdened by workload, many volunteers would withdraw by saying: “I really don’t have the time to be active in AAGEN”. That is really a thin excuse since a person’s time availability depends on his/her priorities. On a cold, raining night after a long day’s hard work, would you still go out to attend an AAGEN event? Will you be willing to adjust your precious weekend time to accommodate a pre-scheduled AAGEN meeting? Once per month, can you give up a few hours of your favorite leisure activity to attend to AAGEN affairs? The answers determine where you put AAGEN on your priority list. And priority comes from your dedication and commitment to AAGEN. The more you get involved in AAGEN, the more you become a respected and recognized community leader. Unquestionably, great professional success requires significant personal investment.**

**In late 2008, I was elected to serve as the Chair of AAGEN for the 2009-2010 term. This was a huge transition shifting my leadership learning curve to a sharply higher slope. Among many tough challenges, the ones coming to mind are:**

-         **How to inspire volunteers to work together to get tasks done and make things happen? Clearly there is not much leverage if volunteers choose to ignore assigned tasks or simply walk away from commitment.**

-         **How to lead leaders? AAGEN has many top APA senior executives. Given their outstanding qualifications and experience, you would think this would be a dream team to lead. Think again. Their strong motivations, confident opinions and outspoken ideas are both daunting challenges as well as valuable assets.**

-         **How to accomplish work and achieve goals with limited funding support?   All executives must wrestle with this dilemma—even more so in the coming decade.**

**There are no quick or easy answers to these questions. Fortunately, my learning within AAGEN has never stopped for me. Throughout the years, I had come to appreciate the value, inspiration, and opportunities received from AAGEN and all the people working with me. This was why I joined AAGEN, committed to AAGEN, and loved AAGEN. It is equally important to remember that I had to reset my priorities and put in hours of hard work to explore, search, learn, and reap what I have been looking for. It is up to me, not AAGEN, to ensure this investment comes to fruition. I recall the scene at the end of the popular war movie “Saving Private Ryan” where the dying captain, after having saved the life of the young private, responded to the tearing Private Ryan’s query how to repay his sacrifice: “Earn it…”**

**When I became the chair of AAGEN, I knew there were many challenges to meet and overcome. Two years later as I write this with the AAGEN members/friends in mind, I am grateful to have the blessing and support from you to lead AAGEN to become a stronger and better organization with a bright future shining in the golden glow of the sunrise of tomorrow.**

**As I put down my final thoughts prior to the end of my AAGEN term, I have found the people of AAGEN to be gracious, welcoming, passionate and devoted. You cannot ask for more than that in either your professional or personal lives. Let me borrow the lyrics of a song: “I can fly higher than an eagle ‘cause you are the wind beneath my wings.” Through ups and downs, AAGEN has now emerged as a bright, vibrant institution advancing the future of Asian Americans in public service. To you and to all my colleagues and friends, you have my deepest respect and gratitude.**

**Many have asked me what I will do next. Well, I will still be around even though I won’t be so directly engaged in AAGEN operations. So this is not good-bye as good-byes occur throughout the journey of our lives, but not in the chamber of human hearts.**

**Best wishes for the coming holiday!**

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