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Remembering Dennis Belcher

*W. Bjarne Johnson**

For more than a decade, I was privileged to work on a relatively regular basis with Dennis Belcher concerning College issues. Even before we began serving on the Executive Committee and working our way through the officers' chairs, Dennis and I wound up serving on a variety of small special purpose committees, both official and unofficial, each focused on discrete issues facing the College for which there usually were neither established precedents nor protocols.

I doubt that any of us who worked on College committees with Dennis fully appreciated at the time how much we learned from him that transcended the substantive knowledge and experience he contributed toward accomplishing committee objectives. He had the extraordinary ability to view the resolution of any issue, no matter how small, within the larger context of how it ultimately served the College and its Fellows. Dennis' unique perspective, together with his talent for communicating his ideas and his vision, taught us what it takes to make changes in the College and how best to go about doing so.

In this process, it was interesting that, after analyzing whatever issue the committee had to deal with, there was never any disagreement that I can recall among the members of that committee as to the best outcome. What set Dennis apart was his grasp of the process needed to implement the desired outcome. Dennis elevated the creation of appropriate processes to facilitate change to an art form, a skill that benefitted the College in ways that were not always evident. It also made him a particularly valuable officer of the College.

Now that neither of us is at any risk of being fired, it is safe to disclose that Dennis and I took a rather unconventional approach to our service as officers of the College. Though Dennis was technically my immediate successor in all positions, we paid very little attention to this distinction. In practice, we operated in tandem in a sort of loose

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partnership. This partnership was not the result of any late-stage rebellion; we simply found it more useful for making changes for the benefit of the College.

There are things we learned before becoming officers that led to this approach. We learned that no idea, regardless of how good it might be in the abstract, would ever spontaneously combust into implementation. We also knew that even the best ideas could never be implemented by any executive action on our part. We used to joke about the awesome power vested in ACTEC officers while recognizing that it consisted merely of the power to coax, never to command.

Ultimately, of course, no change can be effected without the approval of the Fellows. That is as it should be. A consequence of that, though, is that the timeline for any action is neither particularly predictable nor controllable, making the concept of trying to time events to happen on any officer's "watch" generally a pointless exercise. Dennis and I operated on the principle that the only purpose of serving as an officer of the College is to benefit the College and not the officer. Accordingly, we collaborated on various projects over the years, concerning ourselves primarily with successful project completion, not timing. Our collaborative efforts resulted in the College quietly adopting incremental, sometimes painful, changes in policies, operations, and procedures—largely because Dennis was a master at finding ways to make changes work, no matter how difficult.

As just one example (and there are many) of the quiet, incremental changes made to the College in which Dennis played a critical role, many of us became concerned in the early 2000s with the public perception of the College as an institution. While individual Fellows regularly received recognition for their accomplishments and expertise, the College itself had no mechanism for dealing with its public perception.

Our concern with this was not borne of a desire to bask in the reflected glory of being associated with some of the country's preeminent practitioners. Among the College's stated purposes are the goals "to improve and reform probate, trust and tax laws, procedures, and professional responsibility."¹ To do that, the College needed credibility with both lawyer audiences and non-lawyer audiences such as trust companies, investment advisors, and governmental agencies, which meant that the College would have to take charge and shape its public image rather than abandoning it to chance.

To accomplish this, a small study group of Fellows, the Strategic Communications Planning Committee, was appointed to design a

¹ Am. Coll. of Tr. & Est. Counsel, *About Us*, ACTEC.ORG, <http://www.actec.org/about/description-of-the-college/> (last visited Sept. 15, 2017).

strategic public communications plan for the College. Being comprised solely of trust and estate practitioners, though, meant that none of us had a clue as to how to go about this. Fortunately, Dennis was a member of this committee, and through his assistance, the committee was able to secure what was essentially a private audience with the American Bar Association's Media Relations and Communication Services Division at the ABA headquarters in Chicago. With the guidance of the ABA Communication Services Division, the committee spent two days in Chicago developing a comprehensive Strategic Communications Plan for the College to serve as its blueprint for a cohesive plan governing the College's future public communications.

While it did not matter when the implementation of any particular change might occur, actually moving the College's headquarters from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C. was the exception. The College moved to Washington, D.C. during Dennis' presidential year, and the timing could not have been better for the College.

Moving the headquarters of the College had been a subject of consideration and study for several years. While Los Angeles was the birthplace of the College as well as its headquarters from its founding in 1949, relocating the College to be closer to where the legislative and regulatory activities that govern so much of the work of the Fellows simply made sense, at least in the abstract. However, accomplishing the College's relocation took a long time as well as the convergence of many factors.

The retirement of long-time Executive Director Gerry Vogt not only precipitated an intensive search for her successor, but it also made the option of moving the College more practicable. Dennis and I sorted through many applicants for the Executive Director position in Los Angeles, but the Regents approved none of them, finding none to be an appropriate fit for the College.

We became aware that the problem was that nearly every otherwise-qualified applicant came from a background of managing trade associations, not professional groups such as the College. It is not that the hot dip galvanizers of the American Galvanizers Association, for example, could not put on presumably stimulating meetings, but none of the applicants that we found in Los Angeles had the skill set for managing an association of professionals.

Given these factors, consideration of moving the College to Washington, D.C. began in earnest. Relocation of the College would not only result in the College being closer to the regulatory and legislative activities most directly affecting the College, but it also promised proximity to an employee pool more closely in line with the staffing needs of the College. Extensive analysis, financial and otherwise, went into the deci-

sion-making process by the College. Finally, the decision was made to move.

Making that decision was sort of like a dog chasing a car — chasing it is one thing, but catching it changes the dog's focus dramatically in an instant. Moving the College's headquarters to the Washington, D.C. area necessarily involved consideration of three separate locations: Virginia, Maryland and the District itself. Each site had its pluses and minuses, and each had its local laws regarding taxation, labor, and employment. Accordingly, the move required expertise not only in the competitive rental market in the area but also in-depth knowledge regarding banking laws and regulations. We needed to analyze the complexities concerning each of these issues to make a rational decision, but no one of us involved in the move had the requisite expertise to make judgments in all of these areas.

It is likely that few Fellows were ever aware of the tremendous amount of legal advice the College prudently sought to sort through these somewhat esoteric (at least to me) issues. Dennis' law firm, McGuireWoods, provided exactly the legal expertise and advice that the College required. Dennis and I were in regular contact during the transition, and I was amazed at the specialized resources Dennis was able to marshal for the benefit of the College in its move. I do not recall Dennis ever saying much about this at the time, but it would not have been in his character to do so. Dennis was very good at everything he did except for taking any personal credit. From my vantage point, the College is deeply indebted to both Dennis and McGuireWoods for all that he and they did to relocate the College successfully and with minimal disruption of College operations.

In the end, it is apparent that the College benefitted immensely from Dennis' work on its behalf. It was an honor and a privilege to have worked with, and to have learned from, Dennis—my colleague, my friend. I will miss him.