

“NAMRC, the Game Changer: Writing the Next Chapter”

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Opening Keynote: 23rd Annual NAMRC Conference

July 15, 2016~New Orleans, LA

In deciding what I might speak about, I thought I would use the occasion of our history and its context to draw forth some lessons which might provide an effective bridge toward, and enthusiasm for, the future.

It was 1969 and nine came forward.....

It began with a concern about exclusion, a de facto denial of the right of meaningful participation in the affairs of the National Rehabilitation Association and the muting of voices. The notion that some voices counted more than others; an unstated but clearly communicated message that people of color, i.e., African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders, and the issues they cared about, were somehow less important. It was a statement that enough is enough; it was a statement that it was enough of dealing with the inherent contradictions of the obvious visibility of our racial and ethnic and cultural differences, in the face of the equally obvious invisibility of our message and concerns. It was enough of paying the same dues, playing by the same rules, delivering the same company message, yet not experiencing the same opportunity for representation, participation and the articulation of our issues. It was enough of trying to make people aware that disability came in all colors and nationalities. It was enough of trying to convince others that we are also rehabilitation professionals-equally well trained, and equally committed to the plight of persons with disabilities. You see, we had a special kinship with people with disabilities; we understood what it meant to be discriminated against as a result of a characteristic. We understood what it meant to be treated like a stereotype that had nothing to do with our reality as

individual beings. We understood about the need to constantly prove you can, because the assumption-based on your immutable characteristic- was that you could not. It was a time when people were tired of shouting out, “*Man I’m OK too; don’t judge me before you know me!*” It was a time of a multitude of multicultural *microaggressions*-even before the term existed.

It was a time, and an organization, a rehabilitation community, and a profession in need of change.

It was 1969, and nine came forward...

It was five years removed from the passage of the first piece of major national civil rights legislation, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and 101 years after the ratification of the 14th amendment to the US Constitution, guaranteeing equal protection for all under the law.

And it was the same year that:

- The upstart New York Jets won their first super bowl by defeating the Baltimore Colts,
- The internet was established, the first man walked on the moon, the first ATM was installed, Seiko sold its first quartz watch, and oh yes, you could purchase a gallon of gas for only 35 cents.

And, it was also a year when other groups sought change:

- Caesar Chavez conducted a 25 day farm worker fast at the United Farm Workers of America headquarters as a demonstration of nonviolence to draw attention to the plight of the migrant worker; four years after he founded the organization.
- African -American students at Cornell, North Carolina A & T and other universities held protest asking for changes such as Black Studies programs and the hiring of additional African-American faculty.

- In Chrystal City Texas, Diana Palacios, challenged an unwritten rule that only one Mexican American girl can be selected for the school's cheerleading squad which is otherwise made up of only Anglo girls.
- And in November of that year, American Indians boarded boats in Sausalito, California, to Alcatraz, declaring the former prison Indian land by "right of discovery." Their 19 month occupation in defiance of the authorities started a national dialogue about the plight of American Indians.
- One of the movement's greatest triumphs was when Asian American students and other students of color participated in strikes in 1968 and '69 at San Francisco State University and the University of California-Berkeley for the development of ethnic studies programs. Students demanded to design the programs and select the faculty who would teach the courses, (i.e.)-*By us for us!*
- The emergence of yellow power or the Asian –American Civil Rights movement, creating awareness about the inappropriate internment of Japanese –Americans during World War II. The results of this movement were not realized until several years later. In 1976, President Ford signed a proclamation in which internment was declared a "national mistake." Twelve years afterward, President Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which distributed \$20,000 in reparations for each internee, and included an apology from the federal government.

And, in 1969 there were also milestones of progress:

- Judy Baca brought the Hispanic Muralist Movement to the United States.
- Shirley Chisolm became the first African-American woman elected to the US House of Representatives,
- President Nixon issued an executive order requiring all federal agencies to adopt "affirmative programs for equal employment opportunity" (Now lost!)

- Populations from countries in the Far East attending universities in San Francisco established the term *Asian-American* for as a name for themselves.
- Morgan State University, Howard University and Yale University received a one million dollar grant from the Ford Foundation to teach African American studies courses.
- Howard N. Lee in Chapel Hill NC, became the first African-American mayor of a southern city that was predominantly white, and
- Moneta Sleet Jr. became the first African American photographer to win a Pulitzer Prize in photography.
- The acronym, AIM, was established as the nomenclature for the American Indian Movement in this country.

And yes, in this year, at this time, among people of color in rehabilitation, It was the beginning of self-determination, it was the sound from voices that had previously been muffled, it was an awareness of the power of collective action, it was a day for recognition and awareness of the existence of a group of people and the issues that confronted them. It was a step forward in the move toward inclusivity within the rehabilitation community.

It was the day that nine came forward...

It was the birth of a new movement, the first roots for the growth of a new entity, the shaping of a value orientation, and the establishment of an identity.

It was in 1969 at the NRA conference in New York City that this group called the *Non-white Caucus* came forward. They sought policy representation in NRA, a voice on the NRA board, ongoing attention to the issues of non-white members and consumers, support from NRA in obtaining federal funding for minority programs, and, additional minority group members as staff in NRA and in the field of rehabilitation.

And because this value driven and determined, (And yes, also somewhat angry) group with courage, commitment and the beginning elements of a vision came forward, the landscape of rehabilitation was forever changed. Yes, and let us not forget that *vision* part; that ability to see and imagine a different future-and the courage and conviction to transform that vision into a reality. In response to their action, as contained in the now famous Resolution 14, they got formal recognition in NRA as the Council of Non-White Rehabilitation Workers, a seat on the NRA board, two additional nonvoting member positions on the NRA Board, a commitment for an ongoing forum for the articulation of non-white rehabilitation concerns, and a training track of workshops at the annual conference dedicated to these topics. And the impact from their initiative was even more far reaching and profound. It can be seen in the increased number of minority persons in the Rehabilitation Services Administration-which we know currently has a female, African American Commissioner- federal grants initially awarded to Howard and other institutions, seats on the CORE board and the Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification, increased numbers of minority professionals in the Federal peer review process. (I remember being introduced to that process originally by Henry Williams, one of the original “New York nine.”). An additional by-product of this awareness was the production of a monograph and NRA Switzer seminar on *The Rehabilitation of Inner City Non-whites*. That momentum carried forward, and subsequent to that, Tennyson Wright and I had an opportunity to participate in the production of an RSA monograph in 1994, entitled, “Cultural Diversity in Rehabilitation”

Chapter one of this history gave way to the emergence of a new chapter, in the form of something called the National Association of Multicultural Rehabilitation Concerns, established as a new division of NRA in 1991. It occurred when a group of non-white members, petitioned NRA at the NRA National conference in Louisville, Kentucky, to

amend the bylaws and establish this new additional division within the National Rehabilitation Association. Joyce Keener, at that time the Council's Representative on the NRA Board, led the initiative, and Dr. Tennyson Wright was the articulate spokesperson who brought the issue to the floor of the assembly. We are, this year, celebrating our twenty-fifth anniversary of that date! Thus, while the agenda for the new division was driven by similar needs and concerns among minority professionals and those who supported their issues, and it was able to build on the achievements and vision of its predecessor, it differed from the Council in several significant ways:

- Moving from the term non-whites in our name to the term multicultural, helped create an identity not based on who we were not, i.e., non-whites, but what we were, i.e., multicultural beings.
- Shifting from the notion of a Council of non-white members, to a focus of multicultural concerns in our title, moved the emphasis from the composition of the membership, to a focus on the issues related to multiculturalism in rehabilitation.
- Finally, and most significantly to those who were there at its establishment, it moved from simply a group of Non-white members, to a formal organizational entity as a division of the National Rehabilitation Association: A division where one is no longer entitled to belong by virtue of one's ethnic or cultural identity, but one in which one must make a commitment to join via a membership and dues structure.

A division which was shaped by a vision of a national conference, sought to bring people together of common interest and concerns. Its first conference named "Summit One" was held in 1993 in Las Vegas, Nevada. A division, with its own sense of purpose, and mission, built around an agenda of education, awareness, networking and support for its members-one to another-and using

as its principle vehicles- a national conference of its members and the development of local chapters throughout the country. This organization, driven by the core values of helping and supporting each other, of equipping each other through education, mentoring and role models, of assuring peer support and understanding, of creating, encouraging and supporting its new professionals and students, providing opportunities to grow and to lead that individuals may not receive elsewhere, of providing recognition for achievements that might not be granted by others, of assuring the appropriate amounts of encouragement, empathy, and sincere hospitality, that has all helped create this organizational culture sometimes described as “family.” Yes, and as with any organization, the behaviors must coincide with the values in order to sustain the culture. That is, what you do must mirror what you say you believe. Thus the division developed a formal award structure, created scholarships, assured quality in its conferences and workshops, adopted vehicles and behaviors to assure all people were welcomed and respected, developed a tradition of mentoring, created growth opportunities, invested in its actual and potential leaders through targeted mentoring, role modeling, and support, designed special activities, workshops and poster sessions for students and otherwise “incentivized” (or in more simple terms, *strongly encouraged*) their attendance at conferences.

This new division with its unique culture and values, must have been relevant to the needs of its members, it became the fastest growing division in the National Rehabilitation Association; growing in just one year from just over 100 members to a group of nearly five hundred. The results have been profound, the scholarship program, initiated in 2003, will be acknowledging its 13th award winner this year. The organization has established eight different award

categories which recognize organizational, professional and student achievements, and presented over 100 awards to its members during its history. Those awards have appeared in bios and curriculum vitae for job applications throughout the country. Committed to high quality conferences, NAMRC conferences annually receive high ratings from its attendees. Invested in the concept of continuous improvement, feedback is always used in the planning and development of the conference in subsequent years. Members and others have had the opportunity to disseminate knowledge, develop their presentation skills, and created a reference listing for a “peer reviewed” -and you educators know how important peer reviewed is for your resume- presentation for over 400 different workshops and many more poster sessions throughout the years. There is no specific monetary value that can be placed on the networks and the friendships that have been created through the NAMRC division. Equally important are the NAMRC acquaintances that people have been able to use for references and letters of recommendations to support their careers.

By most measures, we have been a very successful and highly respected organization; with a long history of quality conferences, an untold number of NAMRC “graduates” who have made major impacts on the rehabilitation landscape and a multitude of NAMRC members-past and present-who have grown and gained in a myriad of ways from their organizational affiliation and experiences. Ultimately, we hope—and believe that the member gains have been translated into improvements into the lives of persons with disabilities, especially those from culturally diverse communities. And let me take time for some “shout-outs” for the achievements of many of our members: first for the counselors in the rehabilitation system (can you raise your hands) next for those

supervisors, managers and administrators (can we see who you are), and next, our role models in the classroom, the rehabilitation educators, now let those rehabilitation educators who are tenured stay standing, and finally let those rehabilitation educators who are full professors remain standing. I cannot help but observe, based on those who have stood, and my recall of the early years of our division, the profound increase in the number of professors who are members of our association. Congratulations to you all for your perseverance and achievements.

And yet, while there is a rich history to be proud of, we know the environment has changed and there are new challenges surrounding us. The playing field is still not level for persons of color as professionals in rehabilitation or as consumers of rehabilitation services. Some say the slope of the incline on the field has diminished, while others say just the opposite-the slope has become a perpendicular line-as in a brick wall! Distinctions still exist in the critical statistics and outcomes for persons of color in the rehabilitation service delivery system. Pathways and possibilities are still constrained for rehabilitation professionals and educators; while subtle and sometimes blatant differences of treatment continue to exist.

Isn't it ironic that in the midst of our country's election of its first Black president, we have increased exposure of police brutality along racial lines, we have to adopt slogans to attest to the fact that that "Black lives matter", there is a push to keep an entire group of people from our southern border out of our country due to their ethnic origin because they want to work; and a candidate for the highest national office gains popularity because he uses code words like, "Make America great again."

At a time when the need for change has again become evident, organizations like ours are being challenged by a loss in membership. The senior members are fading out, and no new ones are coming to replace them. And those millennials, oh those millennials, what is the matter with them? We say it as if it is a dirty word! We castigate them because they are not like us, and we fail to acknowledge what they bring to the table. I am reminded of an article written many years ago by Dr. Bobbie Atkins, and her counsel to use “an asset-oriented” approach with our clients, i.e., build on the strengths people have, rather than their limitations. Let me share some of the attributes I borrowed from my colleague on our membership study, Dr. Tamika Minor. I have considered the seven characteristics of Millennials she identified, i.e., special, sheltered, confident, team-oriented, achieving, pressured and conventional. In addition we know that they are technologically and social media savvy, have other skills the rest of us do not possess, are more entrepreneurial, and have a different leadership style. Parenthetically, I welcome the idea of a new leadership style, remembering the evolution of leadership styles in this country. At one point we believed in an autocratic style, believing that all knowledge and direction should come from the top. We later learned of the value of a more democratic style, (which, by the way research tells us, is more comfortably practiced by women rather than men), and more recently have appreciated the merits of a situational style; recognizing that a democratic approach may be fitting in certain situations, and a more directive approach in others. Therefore, I’m excited to see what this newest approach in leadership will add to our practice. Now, I don’t know about you but I don’t hear an awful lot of bad stuff in that description of Millennials. And besides that, they now represent the largest generation in the workforce, and the most diverse and largest segment

in the population; currently outnumbering the baby boomers. Forgive my digression into millennials, however, the message is clear for rehabilitation professional associations, we must be able to attract and engage millennials and others to assure our long term survival.

It is time to commence chapter three of our history. As we look to the future, and address the emerging challenges before us, it is critical that we extract some lessons from our 47 year history. Let me comment on the eight items I have been able to identify:

1. My first is the importance of core values to an organization: In a period of change it is the core values that sustain you. They are the belief system that forms the foundation for your actions. They are the credo that set the parameters for your behaviors. They define you as a body.
2. The power of a vision; i.e., the ability to imagine and work to create a better future. Let me capture a few statements on vision. The first from the bible, Proverbs 29:18, *“Where there is no vision, the people perish”*. And several from the literature on organizations: *“A vision is inspirational”*, and finally, *“A good vision is idealistic and realistic; realistic enough so that people believe it is achievable, yet idealistic enough so that it cannot be achieved without stretching.”*
3. It is amazing what one person can do. It is *one* idea from *one* person with initiative and courage, at the right time and place that can cause a profound change. You see, I imagine that before the nine came forward in New York, there was one person who first decided, that it was time to do something. It was one person that started the conversation with their peers. It was one person that gathered the troops and stimulated the action. *It is amazing what one person can do!* That provides a segue to the next point. You see it is the initiative of one, reinforced by:

4. The power of “we”, that is, all of us working together, because we know that “we works”. “We works” because at its best, the uniqueness of individuals and the value added of their contributions and skill sets are not lost but added together for the whole; “we works” because of the creation of energy and synergy which produces a value in the whole which is greater than the sum of its parts; “we works”, because there is power in numbers and unity. *We works!*
5. It is the three “C’s”: There must be *courage, commitment and competence*, yes of course, always competence. Courage comes from our knowledge of what is right, the resonance of our core values, and a willingness to put larger goals before personal prerogatives. Commitment is driven by determination, assigning resources and energy to priorities, and keeping one’s eye on the prize. Sometimes organizations lose sight of what is important; spending undue time and energy on issues of little significance. I serve on the board of an organization, which recently was getting lost in one of these unnecessary and circular discussions on an insignificant matter. Finally, one of the board members, recognizing the absurdity of the excessive discussion, rose and said, *“C’mon, we’re pole vaulting over a mouse turd!”*—I’ve also heard another phrase which captures this excess on the non-critical matters, while the important matters go untouched, as, *“Rearranging chairs on the Titanic.”*—Competence is derived from a commitment to continuous learning and growth, diversifying one’s talents; for example, while necessarily and understandably, our members develop knowledge in diversity and cultural competence, it is critical that they also develop knowledge and expertise in a number of other areas. All members are encouraged to

broaden their scope and develop areas of “distinctive competence”, i.e., the other areas (beyond diversity) and skills sets that are unique to you, and where your presence “adds value” to the mix. Competence is driven by a desire to be the best you can be. *Courage—Commitment – and Competence*. Yes, and don’t let a fourth “C” be an intruder into the family of C’s. That is the “C” of “Can’t do”. You see, “Can’t do” contaminates the whole family; can’t do is a clone for I don’t want to try, I’m too lazy to do, and I’m not leaving my comfort zone. Instead, better take a different “C” into the mix. That is ‘Can do’ “C”. That is the one who encourages, inspires others, shows the way, and takes the first step forward.

6. Challenges create opportunities. If there is no challenge, there is little need to change. Let challenges stimulate creative juices, and not impose a belief system of insurmountable barriers. After all, it is the *belief in* the existence of an insurmountable barrier that makes them so formidable. It was the *challenge* of non-meaningful participation in NRA in 1969, which created the *opportunity* for establishment of our predecessor, the Council of Non-White Rehabilitation Workers.
7. Organizations exist to respond to a need. Organizations which no longer respond to a need, *cease to exist*. Some of us remember when we went to drive-in movies, or had watches that you had to wind, or when there was a need for a “Young Women’s Christian Association with its own separate facilities and programs. Vibrant companies stay in touch with the present and anticipated needs of its customers-or members. They are *customer* driven rather than *product* driven. Product driven companies listen only to themselves, they “know what’s best” for the customer. Product driven companies (and organizations) say “We are good; this is

what we do, take it or leave it". Customer or member-driven organizations, on the other hand infuse the organization with the voice of the customer, and know that *quality* is ultimately defined by the customer. Those interested in this topic are directed to a book I read many years ago by Richard Whitely entitled, "*The Customer Driven Company: Moving from Talk to Action*".

Our final point:

8. Outside of us there are always allies and supporters: We are not on this journey alone. Even when the nine came forward there were empathizers and supporters-both silent and vocal. Sometimes from those we may least expect. Just know that they exist, and do not be afraid to cultivate others. They help to magnify the power of "we."

I am pleased to have had an opportunity to have been a part of NAMRC history and am proud of what we have been able to achieve-together! Given the quality of our membership, and our ability to draw instruction from the past, I remain encouraged about the future. Let us draw from those eight principles to provide guidance and encouragement as we evolve for the future: It begins with the word:

- "We," as in the Power of We
- Next, a new word begins, and starts with the letter "C", as in Core values
- Next comes the letter "A" as in Allies and supporters
- This second word ends with the letter "N" representing Need-driven organizations
- We then have the last word, beginning with the letter "C" again, standing for the three "C's" of Courage, Commitment, and Competence, augmented of course by the "Can do spirit"
- It is followed by "O," as reflected in perceiving challenges as Opportunities

- The next letter is “**P**” as in the Power of vision
- And finally, it ends in the letter “**E**,” for each one, reminding us how amazing it is what *each one* of us can do.

So, it closing, I ask the question, can we cope with change? Let us respond together.

“We can cope!”

Thank you for the opportunity to talk with you and have a wonderful conference.