

Ivan Parkin Lecture

Where Do You Put Your Chopsticks?

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I think we can all agree that IAFP has been very successful. Anytime you are successful, I believe it is a good idea to review what happened, learn how you got there and make sure you don't stop doing what got you from Point A to Point B. We could probably attribute our success to multiple explanations: coincidence and timing, historical foodborne outbreaks that focused public attention on food safety, or

even great leadership. Actually, I believe we can credit much of our sustained growth and success to something else.

When I was a young boy, growing up on the South Plains of Texas in Levelland, many of my heroes were movie and television cowboys. There was no shortage of cowboy movies and television series. In 1956 a movie was released titled *Giant*, actually before I was born, but I watched reruns of it on television. The main character was named Bick Benedict, played by Rock Hudson, and he was a rancher in West Texas when the oil boom was just beginning. So, the movie was about the transitions that were occurring at that point in time – wealth and power shifting from ranching to the oil industry. Well, I thought Mr. Benedict's character in the movie was kind of amazing. We have all been influenced by people we admire and emulate, even if they are actually fictional characters, and those people have likely changed through the years as we transition through life.

Twenty years later, I was a graduate student studying food microbiology under Dr. Carl Vanderzant. He was also kind of amazing and a hero to me, but in a different way. I think Dr. Vanderzant must have had a photographic memory. We would be discussing a food microbiology issue and he would say something like, "You know, I believe I saw an article on that. Don't quote me on this, but seems like it was in 1972, in *Journal of Applied Bacteriology*, in the June issue maybe, about page 147." So, I would go look, and most of the time, there it was.

Sometimes, as impossible as it seemed, Dr. Vanderzant didn't know the answer to something. When that happened, he would call one of his colleagues and ask them. I heard about those guys constantly; I read their publications and books. They were food

microbiology rock stars. And Vanderzant would just call them on the phone. His go-to guy was Dr. Don Splittstoesser at Cornell. Basically, when he didn't know the answer to something, he would say, "I will call Don." So, in my mind, Don was incredible. Remember, Dr. Vanderzant was brilliant and had a photographic memory, and when he didn't know the answer to something, he called someone named "Don." So, in my mind, I pictured Don as 6 feet tall, svelte, brilliant – basically Rock Hudson, in *Giant*. A movie star.

Dr. Vanderzant would regularly take a grad student or two along with him to an Annual Meeting. My opportunity ultimately came up and Dr. Vanderzant mentioned that Dr. Splittstoesser would be at the Meeting – and that he would introduce me if we ran into him! Well, to say I was excited would be an understatement.

We arrived at the Meeting and finally saw him in the Exhibits. He was rounding the corner down at the end of the walkway and Dr. Vanderzant said, "here comes Don." Of course, I was looking for Rock Hudson, and the guy that showed up looked quite different. Dr. Vanderzant introduced me, and Dr. Splittstoesser was extremely nice. He spent quite a lot of time asking me about my research, plans for the future, etc. And, get this – he told me to call if I ever needed anything. Wow – that was Dr. Vanderzant's link to answers to all the hard questions, and I just got a personal invitation to call. I had similar experiences with others who were on my food safety rock star list, and they were all unexpectedly down-to-earth and supportive.

So now I have a realization: I had created these "super stars" in my head because I read their publications and books and heard of them from Dr. Vanderzant. But when I actually met them they were all very nice, open, "normal" people. They were willing to help. I think they were mentors; maybe not in an official capacity, but indirectly, just through relationships. This meant the world to me at that time in my career.

We need to be aware of the importance and value of direct mentorship through relationships. We also need to be cognizant of the fact that contributions and actions can impact others down the road, even without actually knowing the person.

This, to me, is what makes IAFP what it is. It is mentoring, I think, but that is a loose use of the term. Maybe we should call it networking, but it is more than that. We have mentoring relationships. Food Safety Heroes.

Why are these mentoring relationships important?

First, as a group, we are loaded with experience, and I believe that may be one of our greatest resources. And while we have an impressive group of younger members in IAFP, they are limited in that resource. It is not possible to know everything, but, collectively, we get closer. We need others with experience to bounce ideas off of, to hear of similar frustrations and goals. And maybe more importantly, to hear of successes.

How can we intentionally apply this? Here are some ways I think we can mentor – or be Food Safety Heroes:

Seek out younger members, both students and young scientists, and talk with them. Being intentional helps. Go to the poster sessions and find someone alone at their poster. Just ask them to explain it. Catch a younger member after a presentation and provide a little praise and acknowledgment. We all know how hard it was the first few times we had to get up and speak in front of a group. Lunch and breaks – these are great opportunities. Find someone sitting alone at lunch or join a group of students.

Be optimistic. It is important to provide more optimism than skepticism. These young people have new ideas and lots of energy. Mentors should boost the energy level, not suck it away. Sometimes experience leads us to step on dreams. Think back to people who you consider your heroes or mentors. Were they dream-squashers? Quite the contrary, they were people who encouraged us.

If you are really ambitious and want to get right into the thick of things, you can attend the Student PDG or go to the Student Lunch. There is a tremendous amount of energy in there and you can't help but have some of it rub off on you. When you meet a student or younger member, I think it is important to ask them about their work or their research. Find out what they are doing. Give them a chance to talk. It is not all about us.

Another grand opportunity is to get acquainted with our international members. We have so many attendees here from around the world. Such a fantastic chance to learn what is happening across the globe in food safety. And maybe our greatest chance to grow is to interact with our Travel Scholarship winners. Show them what it means to join the IAFP family.

It is not all about youth, though. I think we have all recruited new members. Maybe not directly, but how many times have you mentioned to someone that you would see them at the Annual Meeting and have gotten a puzzled look? I am pretty sure the next thing all of us say is something like, "Let me tell you about IAFP; you really need to know about this association." When you show up at the Annual Meeting and see one of those new recruits you encouraged to join, that is your opportunity. Make sure they feel welcome. Help them with navigating the PDG meetings and the program. Just a small amount of time from you at that point can make or break the meeting for a newcomer.

Finally, I think one of the most rewarding and effective things you can do to support IAFP is to donate to the Foundation. When we provide funds for the IAFP Foundation, that money gets multiplied. It does so much good for the Association: travel scholarships, help-

ing with expenses for international speakers, support for our local affiliates. And if you just don't like to interact or network, this is still a way for you to have a major impact on our future.

I want to make sure I am not misunderstood here. I am not necessarily talking about formal mentoring relationships. We are all busy at the Annual Meeting, but when you see an opportunity, be intentional: speak, include, encourage, donate. We have done these things historically, and we have done them well. My point is that I believe these are things that have made IAFP what it is today. I think as we continue to grow we need to be intentional about this to make sure we do not lose our momentum. I want to encourage you to make an intentional effort to continue to invest in the things that have made IAFP great. Do you have a passion about something in food safety? IAFP gives you an opportunity to pass that passion along.

Certainly, we learn from the symposia, but interaction is possibly more important; at least it is for me. I think a synergism exists not just from our older to younger members, but vice versa, within IAFP. I have experienced that you can learn quite a bit from our younger members. Often the mentoring even works in the reverse direction.

Last year I was having dinner with my family, including my two new sons-in-law. We were at PF Chang's and, of course we were eating with chopsticks – or more accurately, trying to eat with chopsticks. One of my sons-in-law asked me, "Where do you put your chopsticks?" I didn't immediately answer, because I was not really sure what he was asking. He elaborated, "Well, it wouldn't be very sanitary to put them on the table."

Every now and then something happens that reminds us that we missed something, didn't know something, or were just outright wrong about something. This was one of those times. I don't know why, but I had never thought about where my chopsticks were between courses. And now my electrical engineer son-in-law had noticed a food safety issue that totally flew past me. He proceeded to show me how to remove the chopsticks wrapper and construct a rest so they didn't contact the table.

I think maybe the older we get, the more our world is defined by the box created by our experiences, studies, background, etc. If you keep your eyes and ears open, you would be surprised what you can pick up from our younger associates – people who are not yet confined by a box of experience: fresh attitude, new approaches and insights, energy, excitement, new collaborators, new ideas – chopstick rests.

I want to encourage all of you to maintain and build on the synergy that we have through networking and mentoring, direct and indirect. We often hear David Tharp say, "make it your Association." Being a member is important, but investment in the Association is just as important. I think all of us would agree that we have something very special here, and we need to work to preserve it for the future. Everyone's contribution is important and needed.

So, as we open this Annual Meeting, I want to remind you that there may be things that are more important than sessions and exhibits, as vital as they are. I believe relationships are what make IAFP great and I believe what we have here will carry us to greater heights in the future.