

A Tribute to J. Alexander McMahon

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American Hospital Association

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Thank you so much for the opportunity to be here this morning to honor our friend and colleague, and my mentor and role model, Alex McMahon.

Moanie, to you and the entire McMahon clan, I bring the love and support of our nation's 5,000 hospitals and health systems, of those of us privileged to carry on Alex's legacy at the American Hospital Association, and of the innumerable leaders in health care who had the good fortune to work with, tangle with and learn from our beloved Alex.

We are all deeply indebted to him and to you for the devotion you shared and the generous gifts of hands and heart that you both gave to the AHA and its members. Please know that we'll always be here for you ... as Alex always was for us.

Working for Alex as his Special Assistant turned my life in a direction I never imagined. One year out of graduate school, I certainly wasn't his most important hire ... but he made me feel that way. He gave me complete access to the association and its leaders, the opportunity to debate with him on any issue (although I never remember winning!) and access to the other great leaders of the day. He taught me something everyday – at the time, no doubt, I was too overwhelmed to take it all in ... but I hope that as the AHA president today, at least a little bit of it comes through.

As I have spoken these past 2 weeks with others of my generation, they say the same thing – that he always had a special touch for those of us who were young, inexperienced and, we hoped, on the way up. He took time with us; he spoke with us, challenged us and opened up our thinking; and he promoted us – not just into new jobs – he promoted us to others. He built us up in so many ways that, today, we share a fondness and a gratitude for Alex that is only reserved for that very special someone who makes your professional life possible and, in many ways, makes your career.

On one last personal note, Alex meant so much to me and to Barbara, that our fourth child is one ... Alex Umbdenstock. Now, it bugged Alex McMahon that our name choice was "Alex" and not "Alexander" – but just think for a second --"Alexander Umbdenstock"?? We just couldn't do that to the little guy!

Alex McMahon was the first person to hold the title of "President" of AHA and he shaped that elevated role not only to fit a new era facing the nation's hospitals, but did so in ways that became the model for each of his successors.

In 1985, on the eve of his retirement, the AHA formally expressed its appreciation to Alex. "Statesman, leader, negotiator, scholar and teacher." Those were the words used

to describe Alex when the Association gave him its highest honor, the Distinguished Service Award.

To the public and the larger health care field, Alex was the **statesman** who brought the hospital community into the new world of federal health policy – there were the issues of national wage and price controls, the explosive growth of Medicare and Medicaid, and the new possibility of unionization for non-profit organizations, to name a few. It was a dynamic time and he proved to be a dynamic leader.

For hospitals, the consequences of these new issues caused stress and the potential for serious divisions. Previously, hospitals had focused their advocacy efforts mainly at the state level. But now we had to speak with a single national voice and the AHA had to become that voice. Alex was the **leader** who unified the hospital field, cultivated that voice and solidified the AHA as our hospitals' national representative. He reached out to the members and to the 50 state hospital associations as partners in leadership ... but he also was firm and forceful when family fights threatened the association's effectiveness.

Alex's legal training and insurance company experience brought us his skills as a **negotiator**. But maybe it was his Scottish heritage that gave him the stubbornness to fight till he carried the day. And stubborn he could be. You knew he was digging in when you heard him say "Let me 'splain somethin' to you"!

But he also was shrewd – or, as Alex the lover of words preferred, "perspicacious." Yes, he was what Webster had in mind when defining one "of acute mental vision or discernment."

Alex was a distinguished **scholar**, I'm told ... actually, HE told me! But his scholarship was evident to all of us not only by his effortless ... and frequent ... quotations of the great thinkers ... but by his continuing devotion to higher education and, as I said, in his commitment to the next generation's preparation and development. I know that Duke University and the hospital field both benefitted greatly when he returned to this campus giving stature to the graduate program in health administration and eventually positioning it within the business school and the MBA curriculum.

But most of all, for those of us who worked directly with him, it was his capacity as **teacher** that we remember most and for which we will always be grateful. He taught us many things but, as advocates, he taught us to communicate clearly, to choose our words carefully and to compose the written word properly.

Now, I'm sure we've all been his "students" ... whether inside or outside the classroom ... so please permit me to reminisce briefly on what might be a few of our shared experiences with Alex, the teacher.

To start, we learned new words. To be sure, Alex did not live by "shibboleths" – that's, no "slogans" for the great unwashed among us. We learned his made up words – his

favorite and mine was “ab-sa-damn-lutely.” And for one’s personal name, it was never, in my case, Richard ... but “Wretched.”

For some reason, we also learned a lot about dogs. In each scenario, there was “a dog in the manger” ... someone yelping pointlessly about something; and as we debated political strategy, there was always at least one case where ... that dog wouldn’t hunt!

Alex the politician taught us a lot about vote counting. When seeking consensus around HIS preferred position, 60-40 was an absolute landslide ... but if we were stepping outside HIS realm of political reality, 60-40 was a sign of impending danger ... a call for more debate, discernment and if necessary, prayer and extended meditation ... but only for as long as it took US to see the wisdom of HIS argument.

Working with Alex, we were taught to trust people to do the right thing if they were given the right information, and indeed, as a lawyer, for him it did all start with information. “Facts are always friendly,” he’d say, “even if they are not what you really want to hear.” From his executive talents, we learned that it is more important keep a board from straying outside the range of viable options than it is to push your one preferred answer. In those cases, he would observe, “When you lay the cards out face up, I’ve noticed that everyone can pick the ace of spades.” And then, with that devilish grin and a gleam in his eye, he would ask “Now, how do they do that?”

About leadership, the lessons were that “consistency is a virtue” and that leadership resides everywhere in health care – on boards of trustees and in nurse executives – not just in presidents and chief executive officers. Actually, that was the point at which we at AHA first met you, Moanie, as a trustee who saw earlier than others the value of community leaders as national advocates for hospitals.

In the art of debate, as non-lawyers we were taught that old rule, “If you don’t have the law on your side ... argue the facts ... and when you don’t have the facts ... argue the law.” And as a debater brimming with the necessary self-confidence, we can still hear Alex describing himself as being “frequently wrong but NEVA’ in doubt.”

The AHA award citation went on to list his many attributes: idealism and pragmatism; a combination of diplomacy, wisdom and sense of timing; a sense of equity and fairness; and, a sense of community and connectedness as expressed by his challenge to all of America – not just hospitals and clinicians but to business, insurers, labor, consumers and government as well – that we all must be responsible for leading and guiding our treasured, yet challenged, health care system. He lived this shared responsibility by reaching out and building personal relationships with other national health care associations, the corporate community and others ... relationships that stand strong today and upon which we must build the health care system of tomorrow.

Idealism and pragmatism; diplomacy, wisdom and timing; equity and fairness; community and responsibility – those were the qualities Alex exhibited as our President and that he called forth in each of us as leaders.

Last week, this great nation elected a new President and a new Congress and I dare say, these are the very same qualities that need to be called forth in Washington and across the land if, together, we are to surmount the challenges facing us today.

As we celebrate and bid farewell to Alex today, let us renew our commitment to being united and to living out these qualities ... let us recommit ourselves today and tomorrow to being statesmen and stateswomen, leaders and teachers ... in the mold that he has cast for us ... then Alex's legacy will live on in our world just as it does in our hearts.

Would that make our friend, colleague and mentor, John Alexander McMahon, proud?

AB-SA-DAMN-LUTELY!