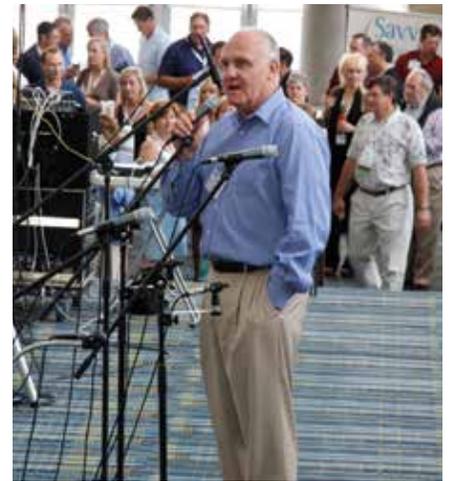
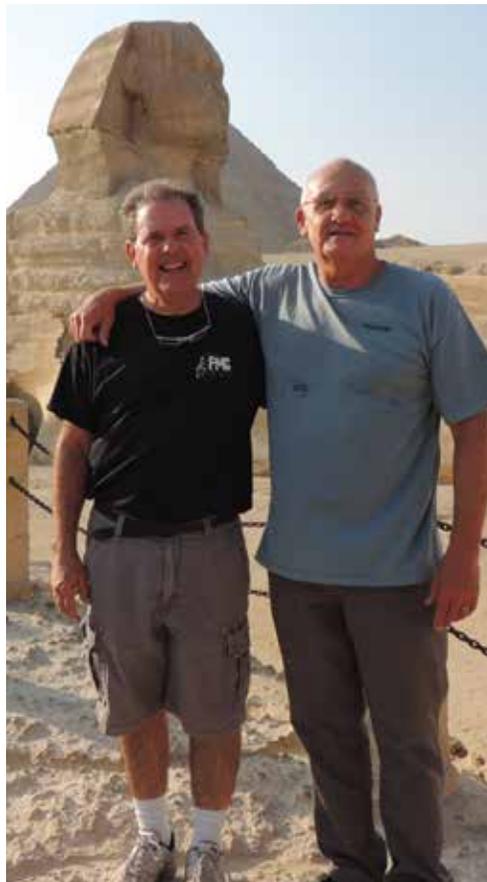
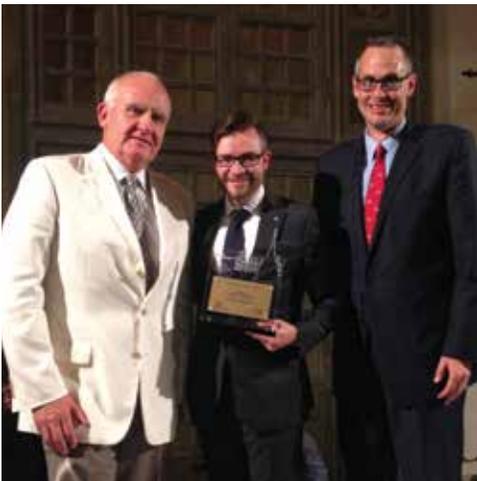


ONWARD

A FAREWELL TRIBUTE TO RETIRING CEO MICK FLEMING

Ben Wills, editor-in-chief of Chamber Executive, sat down with Mick Fleming, ACCE's president from 2001 to 2017, to capture a few recollections, observations and lessons from the 16 years he spent at the helm of the organization. Mick's contribution to the chamber of commerce movement will be felt for generations to come.



For starters, how did it feel in July, at the convention, with all the fanfare surrounding your departure?

It was fun, of course, but I also felt like I did during other times in my life (wedding, delivery rooms, end of a championship season, etc.). I was watching me experience the event.

“Who is that guy saying goodbye to all those people? He looks old and tired.”

Did everybody want a piece of you during those four days in Nashville, hoping to ask you one last question or share something special about their chamber?

That was all fine, but I don't like to be the guy looking over your shoulder when speaking with you. In Nashville, however, almost every conversation was interrupted and a couple of folks were inevitably waiting for a hug or a selfie. I'm sorry that I didn't get one-on-one time with more people.

Is it going to be difficult to leave your position and the organization or are you ready?

Both.

Care to elaborate?

This job, and all that went with it, was the experience of a lifetime. I could never express my gratitude—seeing the nation and the world, interacting with thousands of acquaintances and building hundreds of closer relationships, and making more true friends than I deserve. Heck, I sang Elvis at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and on a Nile River cruise boat. At the same time, it is a job that comes with worries. Not stress, exactly—just worry... about the budget and membership and staff people with problems and whether something I wrote or said would come back to haunt me. A year ago, I knew the time had come to put my family and self ahead of those worries. Current and past chairs Jay Chesshir, Joe Roman and Roy Williams worked for 11 months to help me realize what Joe Reagan called my “envisioned future.” Now I can phase out as gracefully as an old jock can, and Sheree Anne can jump right in. Who gets that kind of help and love on the way out the door?

When you took the job in 2001 you had even more worries. Some of the members who were around at the time tell dark stories of looming financial crisis and eroding belief in the organization. Why did you even consider the job?

Looking back, there were a few reasons: first, I had a crazy ambition to run something on a national scale. Second, I knew from my years at the Business Council of New York State that I loved working with chamber people; and also because I trusted Rich, Frank and Gary.

That would be Rich Hadley of Spokane, Frank Ryll of Florida and Gary Toebben, who was then in Northern Kentucky. They sold you on the idea?

Not exactly. Those three guys made up the board chair succession lineup when I signed on. I trusted them to never leave me to fight alone. After I was on the job, other leaders, who were just as important to our survival and eventual success, stepped in and stepped up with the same level of support.

Was ACCE's progress gradual or are there a few successes from your tenure that really stand out?

Oh, there were a lot of them. Near the end of my first year, membership was still shrinking; and we had to get out of our building, which we were forced to sell to make payroll. Staff still lacked the belief that things could get better. We were running three annual conferences, all of which lost money, and our other non-dues revenue sources were tenuous. The first strategic planning session had failed to come up with anything very strategic. I brought in a consultant and friend from Syracuse and he attempted to goose the team and me. After a two-day staff retreat, I told him I didn't know if we would make it. He asked me, flat out, what I was going to do about it; to which my response was, “I guess we have to go out and raise a million bucks.” So that's what we did.

Who is the “we” you refer to?

Howard Benson of NCDS gave us his system and a coach from his team, on loan. Guys like Dick Fleming of St. Louis took their “team captain” roles seriously, thank God! And then there was a conversation with now-departed leader Mike Hauser of Santa Rosa, that went something like, “Mick, seek out times to talk to members about their investment in the organization. Conversations centered on money will be the richest and most genuine encounters you'll have. They're priceless.” Once I started to look at things that way, the entire job got easier. ▶

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What other turning points stand out during your time at ACCE?

The moment during the 2006 strategic planning session when the board consciously moved to expand our portfolio to include public policy and economic development was huge. Previously, the organization's focus was on the operational and promotional side of chamber work. Then three years later, we launched HERO. The decision four years ago to formally align with the Los Angeles Area Chamber Foundation for grant hunting was also a big moment for ACCE. When I look back now, it seems like most other key moments centered on hiring, firing and promoting.

How did you handle organization and people management when you were on the road so much?

The *who* was always more important than the *how*. I don't know what I did to make our staff stars brighter and I usually didn't know what went wrong with less successful hires... Really! Jacqui Cook didn't have as many letters after her name as other finance VPs I've hired and she is, by her own admission, a bit of a character, which is part of what I love about her. When she took over, our financial reports were, in the words of our outside advisor, "nearly un-auditable." I hired Jacqui and have not worried about the books in nine years. On the flip side, I hired a communications director with all kinds of credentials and a prize-winning interview who turned out to be a real - - - -. How do these things happen? I don't know.

The interviewer, who happens to be the current, but not aforementioned, communications director, laughs nervously.

Best and worst parts of the job?

I don't know if I can put things in those terms. The process that was hardest for me was governance. I felt inadequate going into every board meeting and nominations cycle. The part I liked most was problem-solving for individual chambers and the people who run them. Nothing was more fulfilling for me than case work. I think that is why I said yes to Tamara Philbin when she suggested that we should create a fully-staffed library to institutionalize that kind of service.

Tell us about the people—our members. Any characters or incidents worth talking about? Any life or work lessons?

Two words: Jack Camper. Nearly everything that came out of Jack's mouth—from his moving eulogy at Mike Hauser's memorial service, to his colorful descriptions of the Tucson Chamber's latest board chairman—was worth quoting at a bar. Conversations with people in trouble were inspirational—somebody hit by a storm, or threatened by their chair-elect, or new to a job they had no idea how to do. I feel close to all of those individuals, but I won't mention their names outside the confessional.

Who else?

Well there were a few people who terrified me, especially in the beginning. Dick Blouse ran the Detroit Chamber, the biggest in the country. He was as supportive as could be, but I had nightmares about the things he could have done to me and my career; it was completely illogical. I told him about those fears a few years later and we laughed about it. Those kinds of relationships last.

Oh, and the young people often had big impacts on me. Due to organizational necessities and governance, I was usually stuck in the company of the "old guys" at ACCE events, but one of the reasons I was addicted to the road was because travel gave me so many opportunities to get to know the "kids": a meeting planner from Boca Raton, an eager young lobbyist in El Paso, a newly hired controller in Bellevue, a rookie exec in Naperville. They were my fuel.

The 9/11, hurricanes Katrina and Sandy stories—the human stories—are indelibly etched. When I asked Jack Friedman in Queens "what can ACCE do for you?" after a flood and fires hit in his borough, he answered, with straight-forward New York pragmatism, "Can you send a chain saw?" We did. Lacey Toledano displayed the bayou version of gallows humor when I told her I was coming down to visit Louisiana after Katrina; "Okay, Barbara and I will take you on the disaster tour." These are chamber people—my people!

What's your proudest professional achievement from your time at ACCE?

I could point to strategic planning advances or big events, but I think the proudest moment I ever experienced was ACCE's meaningful response to Katrina. That work touched individuals who were literally in tears, as well as chambers and communities on the edge of despair. In general, I'm proudest of the many times we were there to support our members during crises, and there were many.

What memory stands out more than any other (from your time at ACCE)?

That's easy. The morning of 9/11 when the new employee (me) stood in the conference room with the staff around the TV and watched the twin towers collapse.

A lot of members comment on your writing—holiday messages, magazine columns, the Horizon Initiative and other musings. Do you plan to do more writing in the future?

I do like to write when I can make a point or two, but I doubt if I'll write another book, if that's what you're asking. To be honest, I've had to hold my pen and tongue a lot in this job. If I had a small impact on our world from coloring within the lines, maybe I can have a bigger influence when I can tell it as I really see it after leaving the corner office. ►

Who taught you to write?

Many people, but there were three big influences. My dad taught me that the words matter. Always. And then there was my boss and mentor, David Shaffer, at the Business Council whose pointed and constant criticism of my writing was the best gift he could have given me. An anarchist professor, who taught a 101-level writing class at Cornell, taught me that I must “get out on the table” when I write about anything. I try.

Do you teach the people who work for you how to write?

No. I offer helpful feedback at times, but nobody can work at ACCE if they can't write. Almost every employee has taken a timed writing test. Even our receptionist. So, we know going in that every individual can write adequately. After that, staff members help each other meet expectations.

You've traveled a lot: 50 states, 24 countries, hundreds of cities and towns... you must have favorites.

Not so much. I tend to like all the places I go because my members and friends are there and they like them. Of course, a palm-lined walkway to the beach, a terminally cute little village or a vibrant downtown can't help but appeal and beckon. In places facing abject, long-term poverty, I feel uncomfortable and powerless to help; but even in those settings, I see the lives behind the broken windows, littered streets and “space available” signs. I guess it's my job to see past hopeless.

What advice would you give to a younger professional who is early in their chamber of commerce career?

Working in chambers can be hard and kind of precarious sometimes. But that's the same in every kind of organization and industry these days. I guess I would ask them whether they want to take such risks and put in many long hours working on a mission that matters? If so, the chamber world is a good option.

They say hindsight is 20-20. If you could go back and do something differently, what would it be?

It took me until three years ago to stop micromanaging. And once I stopped, the organization advanced twice as fast.

Let's talk about “Deathbed Confessions.” The concept on this speech you presented was, what if you could know now what you'll know then? After more than 30 years in the nonprofit world, about half of which was spent leading ACCE, what do you wish you had known when you started? Do you have any non-deathbed confessions to make?

I wish somebody would have told me sooner that the person who loses their temper first loses the argument. Oh, and I wish I had known that service is selling and selling is a service. In terms of confessions, I have always had trouble keeping the main thing the main thing. Throughout it all Barbara Hoyt Fleming, my wife of many years, has been the main thing. ☑

The ACCE board of directors, countless volunteers, staff and many friends made along the way wish Mick Fleming a fond farewell. The impact made on the organization will be felt for decades. Thank you, Mick, for your contribution to the chamber movement.

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