

Not Just Another Pretty Face

Tribute to David Chojnacki at the SEC 2017 Gala in Bangkok

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I attended my first NESAs Conference in Rhodes in 1979 never imagining the impact NESAs would have on my life or the place in my heart that all those deeply connected with the organization would occupy. Relatively young and impressionable, it was impossible not to be captivated by Stanley and the indomitable Mary Anne Haas. Some months prior to the conference the US Embassy in Islamabad had been burned to the ground and two US Marines killed. The keynote speaker at the Rhodes conference, Elmore Rigamer, was a State Department psychiatrist who specialized in helping children deal with trauma. The NESAs map was redrawn a few times in the following years, and I was hooked on an organization that responded to compelling world events that felt up close and personal and educational pedagogy tailored to the overseas international school.

I became a "NESAs Rep" for Cairo American College, and I managed to extend that appointment for many of Stanley's remaining years at the helm and well into David's tenure, allowing me to attend both the planning conferences and the Spring Teachers' conferences. This, of course, resulted in a deep appreciation and unconditional affection for the real heart of NESAs, Jill, Laura, Aristeia, and now Bridget and Maria, responsible for the nuts and bolts organization of every NESAs event and face-to-face encounters with every single person present at all conferences. It is impossible to understate the grace and charm with which they respond to every challenge thrown their way, and from a ringside seat at the barrier table at the NESAs office doorway I can tell you that they get a lot of challenges.

David came into my life when, as Director of the American Embassy School of New Delhi, where ironically, I now teach, he interviewed successfully to be the Director of Cairo American College. It took about 30 seconds to be seduced by his charm and warmth. I didn't know immediately that he would become a treasured lifelong friend but it didn't take long for that to happen. What soon became clear was that David's charisma knows no bounds. Even without actually knowing him, it is difficult not to love him. So, some years later, for David to take up the mantle of NESAs Executive Director it was not only appropriate, it was destiny.

Not that it was going to be a piece of cake. As if following the visionary Stanley Haas was not difficult enough, the world had changed politically, technologically, and pedagogically, since NESAs's early years. But David was not just another pretty face. His incredible networking skill, his educational insight, his unparalleled people skills, his kindness, and his integrity allowed him to refashion NESAs into the relevant organization it remains today. But what is truly remarkable about David is that he not only touches your life professionally, he touches your life personally. I'd like to think that I'm a special case, but I'm willing to bet that he knows most of the people in this room by total biography and that many of you treasure countless acts of unexpected sensitivity and thoughtfulness just as I do.

To be politically correct I know that I am supposed to end this tribute by stating that NESAs and David have made me a better educator but, more importantly, I think NESAs and David have made me a better person. And although I know that I will miss many aspects of David's NESAs leadership, not the least of which is the comfort of not always being the oldest person in the room, I know that NESAs is in the very capable hands of another person I love, Maddy Hewitt, and that David will never be very far away and will remain someone on whom I can count for support for the rest of my life.