

Helpern Laureate Award Speech: “Risks and Persistence” (Final Version)
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- Nothing ventured, nothing gained
- No good deed goes unpunished
- If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.

These idioms are about taking risks and being persistent, and pretty much describe my career.

In 1986 when the late Jim Bell was NAME President , I undertook my first NAME project as Coordinator for NAME's newly formed Pediatric Toxicology Registry. I learned that it is hard to get busy forensic pathologists to participate in such projects. I also learned that it's hard to get forensic pathologists to follow instructions. But continuous prodding and persistence eventually paid off, and the registry grew with time.

In 1989 and '90, when Marcella Fierro and John Butt were NAME Presidents, I was asked to Chair a Journal Editor Search Committee to replace the orange journal's founding Editor, the late William Eckert. This was not without risk of criticism or challenges to our processes and recommendations, and it even put the NAME leaders at some risk. We went to a lot of trouble in soliciting and reviewing nominations, interviewing candidates, and recommending a new editor. Guess what? The journal owners selected someone else. It was a little embarrassing, but things worked out okay. It showed the journal owners that NAME was committed to the journal and its improvement, and NAME became more involved with the journal over time. The

Journal Subcommittee also considered alternatives to the journal—without success— and continued to do so long after I left the committee—for more than twenty years. Finally, in 2010, NAME selected Academic Forensic Pathology as its official journal. It was a persistent effort, and it was a risk for NAME, but worthwhile as I see it.

Also in 1989, I was involved in a major re-write of the Georgia Death Investigation Act and related laws. The GBI felt its control of death investigation was being challenged. The coroners saw the changes as an initial step in eliminating the elected coroner system. The provision for a State Medical Examiner Commission and State Medical Examiner was viewed as a threat by some. But these changes were the basis for much improvement. Georgia went from non-physicians doing autopsies and having less than a handful of forensic pathologists in the state to now having more than 20 forensic pathologists and no non-physicians doing autopsies. Risks were taken by being novel and progressive, and there were some failures, but the overall outcome has been very positive.

In 1991, I took a job as Director of Autopsy Pathology at Grady Hospital that also included work with Gib Parrish and others with the CDC's Medical Examiner/Coroner Information Sharing Program. It was a gamble but a positive move because I became involved with the CAP Autopsy Committee and broad issues regarding the autopsy, public health, and death investigation. It was during this time that I set up NAME's first website, the NAME News newsletter, and NAME-L in 1994. Talk about risks! For years now, I have been blasted by many on NAME-L. Vince DiMaio even suggested on NAME-L that all of us involved with SWGMDI standards resign or be

expelled from NAME. Guess what? Vince is now on a National Commission that will probably foster the development of standards! But the heat and challenges I've endured on NAME-L were worth it. I think it's brought us closer together. It's caused NAME to re-think some things and become more proactive and progressive.

Two years after my NAME Presidency in 2001, NAME relocated its office to the Fulton County Medical Examiner's Center in 2003. This process involved risks of the unknown. It also was controversial and I was accused of trying to take over the organization and set myself up to become its Executive Vice President. But the gamble NAME took paid off in some ways. NAME developed a more comprehensive membership data base. The whole system for publishing meeting abstract books, the program, and committee reports changed and improved. Many informative surveys and analyses were completed. NAME actually had its own office space, and, the move showed that NAME could function without the umbrella and constraints of a university department location.

When NAME moved back to Missouri in 2008, I must admit that my heart was a bit broken. I was even a bit angry at first. But NAME moved on, and so did I. I believe that NAME's move to Atlanta started a forward progress. NAME continues to get better. I do hope that someday, NAME will have its own facility which can remain in operation no matter who is working for the organization. Will NAME eventually take that risk? We'll see.

Almost every project of my career has come with risk of criticism or outright challenges. The NamUs system. “Why are we competing with NCIC?” Sudden Infant Death Investigation Guidelines. “Why are these being forced upon us?” The NIJ Guide for Death Scene Investigators. “How can you expect us to comply with these when we are understaffed and underfunded?” The first NAME website. “This is amateurish, and needs to be improved.” The recent autopsy facility directory project. “Why are you discriminating against private sector providers?” The forensic pathologist literature publication project. “Why are my articles missing?” Salary surveys. “Why are you poking into our business?” NAME Forensic Autopsy Standards. “These are bogus, and they will be used against us.” NAME-L. “Why can’t you moderate this thing and shut people up?” SWGMDI. “Who are you to impose standards upon us? Who put you on SWGMDI in the first place?” The NAME Guide for Manner of Death Classification. “That’s not how I was trained!” Guidelines for writing cause of death statements. “Where did you come up with that stuff?” Suggesting that we stop the coroner versus ME argument and just fix the systems we have. “That’s heresy!” We need 1000 forensic pathologists in this country. “That can’t be right. Your math must be wrong.” But such criticism does not bother me. It makes me think and either re-affirm or change my approach to things. I hope it helps others, too.

I am pleased to see some young people in our organizations taking risks. Some are doing consulting and private practice rather than the traditional path of working in a medical examiner office. Some are active on social media. Others are novel and have designed and constructed personally owned autopsy facilities which provide services in needed areas. It was young people who took risks and started our new journal. Younger people are being heard and

given leadership positions and they make us proud. More and more younger people are giving excellent presentations at NAME meetings which have gotten better and better with time.

What a positive change in this organization. Thank you for taking the risks of participating and leading.

Also amongst our ranks are people who have taken the gamble of becoming a Chief Medical Examiner of an office that has been troubled and under the public eye. They do this with hope of making things better. Forensic pathologists are being elected as coroners. Thank you for taking these risks. You and others will reap the rewards. If you work in a setting that you don't really like, try to change it for the better. Who knows what will happen unless you try?

Many of our past NAME leaders and members have put themselves on the line, sometimes with success, sometimes with failure, but always with commitment. Regarding the development of inspection and accreditation criteria it was Leslie Lukash in the 1970s, James Bell in the 1980s, Bob Goode in the 1990s, and Garry Peterson early this Century. Tom Hegert stood up for organ and tissue procurement. Ed Donoghue had to defend forensic pathology as the practice of medicine and calm the controversy about eye donation. Mike Bell was involved in support of the Autopsy Standards and the hiring of NAME's first EVP which evolved to Kurt Nolte's position today. Fred Jordan, John Hunsaker, and Joe Prahlow managed the issue of NAME's transition back to Missouri. Mary Ann Sens and the NAME Board showed some guts when they approved the establishment of our new journal and the use of the ASIP meeting management group for our meetings. Victor Weedn, Jonathan Briskin and others have stood up to prepare amicus

briefs on tough issues for NAME. Most recently, President Alabama Greg Davis had to step up to the plate with a position on dissemination of copyrighted articles, proposed NAME Autopsy Standards changes, and the coroner versus medical examiner debate. As we heard this morning, Larry Lewman's efforts to change laws in Oregon took decades of commitment and persistence. These are just a few examples of NAME's leaders and members taking risks, being persistent, and working with commitment. I am encouraged by what I see in NAME.

I will take a risk right now and says this: There are a lot of what you might call "characters" amongst the ranks of forensic pathologists. But that's okay. We not only accept it, but we have come to expect it. You can't do a job like this for decades and not become a bit weird in some way. Speaking of that, do you know what Lester Adelson would say if he were alive at this very moment? "Get me out of this casket!!"

I want to thank sincerely the forensic pathologists who have worked at Fulton County since I became Chief in 1998. Eric Kiesel, Carol Terry, Geoffrey Smith, Michele Stauffenberg, Karen Sullivan, Michael Heninger, and Melissa Pasquale. Without their support, I would not have been able to engage in many of my professional activities over the years. They have held down the fort. I also thank the people who trained and encouraged me—Saleh Zaki and the late Bob Stivers and John Feegel. And most importantly, I thank my wife, Mary. She has carried the weight of our lives on her shoulders. She has held my dreams in her heart, as if they were her own. What a blessing she has been to me.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained. To future NAME leadership: don't be shy, timid, submissive, and satisfied with the status quo. To quote poet James Russell Lowell, "Not failure, but low aim is crime." So, aim high. And to all, take some risks. Try to make things better. In trying, you will find your reward.

Becoming involved in NAME was the best thing I ever did professionally because of friends gained, lesson learned, and projects accomplished. Receiving the Helpern Laureate award is a great honor, and is certainly the highlight of my professional career. I am humbled and honored to be added to the list of the previous nine recipients since it was first given to the late Joe Davis in 1991. I thank the NAME Awards Committee, Executive Committee, Board of Directors, and all of you for recognizing me with this prestigious award. I will cherish it always.