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The Life and Legacy of Greg Alexander

SALLY FOGERTY: Thanks, Donna. I'm actually not going to use a Power Point presentation. I'm going to actually talk about what I know of Greg, not as a researcher, not as someone in the academic world, but someone who I think was a true leader, a visionary of MCH. Someone who was involved in being a creator of many leaders in MCH. You've heard of two areas he was involved in. In research he certainly was involved in mentoring and leading students and guiding them. But even more than that over the past 14 years as the individual who led the Institute for Maternal and Child Health leadership he was involved in working with over 1,500 different individuals from states.

What I remember most of Greg from the very beginning as he took over the institute, when I think it was questionable. Was it going to survive? Should it exist? What should it do? Do we need it? Why do we need that? We have MCH EPI conference. We have the AMCHP conference. We have all sorts of conferences that states can go to, that staff working in states can learn from and gather expertise. He saw it as something more critical, something that could create within states true leaders.

When Greg first took over the institute, it actually had a lot of clinicians that came. It had individuals who came who had been involved in the field of MCH for years, nurses, physicians, social workers, graduates of MCH programs, individuals who when they entered knew something about MCH. That changed as states have changed, as the role of MCH and states have changed.

In the last institute that Greg was actually involved in, I think the average time that the 42 people at that institute had been involved with MCH was less than a year. Less than a year. They came from all walks of lives. They came from all backgrounds. Some even came from Medicaid and oh Greg loved it when there was some there from Medicaid. He just thought that was wonderful because boy was he going to convert them. And you know what, he did. He taught those individuals there what MCH was all about.

How many of you actually ever went to an MCH institute? Not many, but a few. Those of you who've been there must remember the history of MCH. I actually remember and I think Greg started working on it before he took over as leader of the institute what he called I think it was the timeline of MCH. And he actually sent out to every MCH program, Title V program in the nation a set of slides. I think the notebook was about this thick. We then I think managed to get them on maybe eventually on a Rom, a CD Rom and you could unload them, you could download them but you had to make sure your computer database was large enough.

And what he would do at each institute is he would say how many of you know about the timeline of MCH? And everybody went huh-uh, I don't know what that was. Oh, am I supposed to know something about that. So what he did is he actually created within the institute a whole session on the history of MCH. He then went to MCHB and worked with them on creating a wonderful history of MCH.

One of the reasons for that is that Greg as a leader--and I believe he was one of the true leaders of MCH in this country and one that has laid a legacy that will not be forgotten--is that he knew the importance of the history and he knew how important it was for each of us to understand that history if we were to move forward and to continue to change and improve the outcomes for families, mothers and children.

He never failed to bring in to the institute or when he worked individually with states his research as well as the most current research that was being done in the field. And he challenged each state and each member of that state's staff in those institutes to think about how they could use that research when they went back home.

But most of all what I think he did is he helped to create a vision of MCH. He started with the big picture and he could go down to the details. He never forgot

the importance of communication, of seeking a common goal, of finding out what those goals were for the nation and for states and the importance of building teams as we move forward. He also had this real capacity to energize and to empower each individual to do their best to bring about a change. He felt that there were leaders at all levels and that it was important to encourage each person to be their very best as you have already heard. He encouraged each of us no matter where we were to learn something new.

I actually remember one time when he called me and said I want to add a session on economics. And I said well it sounds really good. Yes, on the financing of health care as it relates to MCH. And I said oh I think that's really great it's exactly what's needed. Who are you going to have do it? And he said, you. And I said me, what do I know? And he said, you're a Title V director, you're in a state, you're involved in providing care so learn it. And I sort of looked and said I'm not an economist. I'm not in health care financing.

He said I don't want that. He said what I want to know and what I want people to learn is why it's important that people in public health and in MCH understand how health care is financed, understand the role of Medicaid. So under his guidance we managed to put a session together and he never, ever gave up in challenging me to continue to think about how that sessions moves, what we do and the importance of what each member of the faculty of the institute provides, how does it link together.

I would also be remiss though if I did not talk about the fact that the institute since 1994 has been in nine different locations. And there was one critical part that went with the movement from location to location. Sometimes--and we spent a lot of time in St. Louis by the way, which those that are here from AMCHP remember our board meeting in St. Louis, which I don't know how many are from St. Louis but a lot of people have not seen as the Mecca.

Greg however did one important research component in every place we went and that was where to eat. Eating and food were critical. So no matter where we were it was always an adventure. For everyone who came to the institute they learned not always what they should see in the area although that might have been part of it, but what they learned most was where the best restaurants were. And he made sure that he learned from everyone where they ate, what they ate, was it good, or wasn't it good. I think with that he integrated into our world real life. He integrated in the importance that we need to have on looking at what's happening in the world as we think about how we're going to improve the lives of families, mothers and children.

Greg shaped our ideas. He worked to make sure that these 1,500 people developed skills and expertise in problem solving, in social judgment, in knowledge, understanding how to bring data to action. And he did it in such a way that when everyone left they felt like they had done it themselves. They felt

like they were the individuals who were going to go back and translate what they had learned into action within their health departments. To me that is the trait of a true leader and Greg was certainly a true leader.

More than that, if I think about his legacy, he has certainly educated and mentored individuals. You've heard two research projects that were going on that he was interested in. But more important he managed to infiltrate every state. He managed to give everyone his philosophy of MCH because he did that, because there were representatives from every state at the institute and he made sure that no one left without understanding MCH and the importance of MCH within public health. He could integrate the medical side in with the community and sanitation side because he never forgot to remind everybody he really was a sanitarian to begin with. That's where he started and that the importance of that and that role as we move forward.

More than that, for me, as a Title V director and as someone within the state and within state government I felt he truly recognized the role that states could play working with communities and working with our national leaders and our national agencies in truly making a difference. He understood systems. He understood how we could use those systems to move forward. And he always did it with humor, again, reminding us where to eat as long as we didn't eat eggplant or we didn't make him eat eggplant, which I know he was allergic to and which he didn't like. However, we could eat anything else and we could have fun doing it.

He had the vision. He had the conviction that a dream could be achieved. As Donna said, he lived his life fully. He lived it for each one of us. And he left us, I think, with a responsibility to carry on his work and to do that so that we can continue to reduce the disparities between the black and white, Hispanic birth rates so that we can assure that each child reaches their full potential, that each family reaches their full potential.

I think he left us a legacy. He is truly missed and he is someone who we can continue to learn from. He is someone who again has shaped much that is going on now. He is someone who will always be remembered. Thank you.