
Professional Issues

2006 National Society of Genetic Counselors Presidential Address: Join Me on the NSGC Journey

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Rather than focusing on specific goals for the upcoming year I would like to address why I am standing before you today, and what it means to me to be a leader and member of NSGC.

I have to tell you that standing up here in front of you is a surreal experience for me. I distinctly remember 13 years ago at my first NSGC meeting sitting in the audience and looking up at the current president of NSGC thinking, “there is no way I will ever be up there doing something like that!” Now let’s be honest, it was probably closer to 10 years ago since the first several years I attended the conference I probably skipped the business meetings But regardless of the exact time, I was confident that being president of NSGC was not in my future. And this feeling was not based on thinking, “there is no way I would ever want to do that,” it was really based on, “there is no way I ever could do that.” The question of would I want to do it, never even entered my mind. Well, you may ask, “What happened?” The answer is that after I had been working for a few years, I decided that maybe I should get involved in NSGC. At that time I was not even sure what “getting involved in NSGC” meant. I knew there were these “committee meetings” at the AEC, but I was never quite sure what these committees actually did. All I knew is that I needed to sign up for a box lunch if I wanted to eat at the meeting. As you can see, I usually try to focus on the most critical issues at hand. I feel like my story of “how I got involved in NSGC” is a little like going

for a hike in the woods on a trail you have never been on before. It seems like a good idea, so you can learn and see more, but you are not really sure where it is taking you or where you will end up.

My own journey began when I joined a committee and took on some very small roles. Through these roles I started to gain a better understanding of what a professional society was all about. As time went on I volunteered for more substantial projects and this is where the trail became even more interesting Yes, the incline increased and it was a little harder, but the rewards were equally worthy. It was like coming to a bend in the trail, rounding the corner and seeing an unbelievable waterfall. It might have been a hard climb to get there, but well worth it. There were times during my journey that I felt like I had taken on a trail that was just too hard, or that I was on a trail with so many twist and turns I couldn’t even enjoy the view along the way. At some point, I realized I couldn’t see everything, so I needed to prioritize. I distinctly remember being asked to chair a task force and thinking I should do it, it would be so good for me, I would learn so much I decided over the weekend that I would do it! And then for two nights I couldn’t sleep, worrying about how I was going to find the time with the other commitments to NSGC that I already had. If I said yes, I wanted to make sure I could do a good job. I wanted to continue to be positive and passionate about what I was doing and I realized I was just feeling anxious. My decision to say “yes” was based on my fear of never being asked to do something again. I was putting myself and my interests ahead of what was best for NSGC. So Monday morning I decided to listen to my feelings and

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said “no” for one of the first times in my life. And you know what; it was okay . . . and yes, as you can see I did get asked to do other things for NSGC. I felt good that I had enough insight to realize that I was pushing myself too hard and if I would have continued down that path I would have had my head down, putting one foot in front of the other and never looking up to listen, learn and see the beautiful sights and sounds along the trail. At that point I may have decided that I was done and did not want to go any further. Luckily I made the right decision for me, which allowed me to continue on my trail.

The journey for NSGC is a different kind of journey than my personal one. One of the main differences is that it is not about a single person, it is about a group of people. And it is not about starting an ill-defined hike in the woods, it is about critically thinking about where you want to go and how you want to get there. NSGC’s journey started 25 plus years ago with a small group of visionary individuals thinking about the future of genetic counselors and where we needed to go as a profession and as an association. When you plan a group journey like this, there are many things that need to be taken into account. Where do we want to go? What do we need to take? How will we get there? Should we walk, run, or jog? And lastly who will we take on our journey?

Let’s spend a moment thinking about each of those questions:

Where do we want to go? This is one of the main questions we have to ask ourselves and it is why we do strategic planning and the member survey. This requires us to be able to think about the big picture, the future and how we fit into the future. This is not about the “how,” but about “what” we want to accomplish. The job of the Board of the Directors is to think about where we want to go. What do we want to accomplish and where do we see our profession in the future? Should we go to the top of a mountain, to a waterfall, or to a lake tucked in the woods? So you elect some people to lead you on your journey. Part of this process is trust. You trust that they will determine, with your input, the best place to go, a place that will serve the greater number of your group.

The next question is what do we need for our journey? What or who is going to provide us with the support we need to make this journey? And do we have a good structure that will enable to move forward and quickly make decisions when they are necessary. This question addresses the many issues

of governance and the association management company we choose. As an organization we have been discussing board structure for many years, knowing this is a critical issue. It is our responsibility to ensure that we have a board structure that can meet the needs of our organization by being proactive, not reactive, moving forward, not stagnant, and self-renewing, not declining. We also need to make sure that our support system allows the volunteers of this organization to be efficient and focus on the bigger issues and projects and not on the administrative details. We need a strong partner during our journey, with whom we have mutual trust and respect. Without trust our journey would become tenuous, dysfunctional and frankly, just not fun anymore.

What route should we take to get there? This is the question of “how” we get there. This is the area where the organization relies heavily on the members and staff of NSGC. This is where we need to tap into the passion, energy and creativity of our members to help us determine how we can get our initiatives accomplished. The staff of NSGC is critical in this endeavor because they provide the support to our volunteer members to get the job done. Picking the route can be a tough job! There can be many different ways we can get to our destination, some harder than others. We can start out on what seems to be the best trail and sure enough we round a bend and there’s a huge tree that has fallen down and blocking our path. Sometimes we can work together to move the tree. Sometimes we need to consider if we want to pay someone else to move the tree. And sometimes we have to decide if it is worth moving or should we back up and start down a different trail.

It is also possible that we can get lost while we are on our journey. We might be walking along a trail, but not sure anymore of where we are going or if once we get there, it is still the best destination. This makes me think of the movie *City Slickers*, which some of you may remember. They are driving the cattle across country in the pouring down rain, they have no idea where they are or where they are going, and Phil says “Ah perfect, we’re lost, but we’re making good time!” It is times like those when NSGC might just need to regroup and get back on track. It can be really frustrating when your leaders decide to direct you to a different trail, or maybe they even change the destination! Now what? We have all planned journeys that have not exactly taken the route we would have anticipated or have turned out exactly as we planned. This is where we realize our

strategic plan is a living, breathing document and that we all need to be flexible and responsive to the environment around us and accepting of the subsequent changes.

Should we walk, run or jog? This can be difficult because not everyone on the journey has the same pace. Some people are fast walkers, some are leisurely, and some want to run ahead! Because of this it can sometimes feel that we may be moving too fast or to others too slow. In this past year, we had to take time to learn about our new management company and they had to learn about us. We had to build trust and take time to learn to walk together before we could run. Nancy Callanan did a remarkable job leading us through this executive office transition and was wise to know that if we tried to run too quickly we would fall. It was important to walk together solidly and with stability so that when we do run we will be successful. Understand that it does not mean that NSGC will never stumble or even fall, but we will have the endurance and strength get back up, quickly.

Who should we take on our journey? Will you take everyone, or will you limit the number or type of people you bring? Will you only bring people who think the same as you, or will you open the journey for those who may think or do differently than you or the majority. The beauty of bringing everyone along is that you get to see and experience different things than if you were alone or in a smaller group. You get to appreciate what everyone brings to the trip and most importantly those who are along for the trip need to feel welcomed. We need to be open, not defensive to those who may question the destination or the route we are taking. Everyone should have a voice during our journey. We should not feel threatened by people who choose different things and have different viewpoints. Isn't that what makes a journey exciting? Doesn't it make us stop and appreciate a different view? Think about how much we could miss if we did not have someone looking at things in a different perspective, noticing other things along the trail. We may never see the wild flower tucked within the grass or the unusual bird singing or embracing the unexpected. I personally don't want to

miss out on seeing these things, which is why I encourage all members of NSGC to make their voice heard.

For 25 plus years we have been on this journey together, some of you have been on it from the beginning and others are just joining. During these years there have already been many twists and turns and again this past year we had another big turn in our journey. It allowed us to take time to rethink many things. Personally, I feel we are at a fork in the trail. We can choose to take the familiar trail and "stay the course" or embrace our new resources and status and take the opportunity for change. My vote is for the latter, because I believe, as the NSGC Board of Directors was recently told at our strategic planning meeting: "If you do what you always did, you will get what you always got."

Like NSGC, I was recently faced with a fork in my own personal trail. Do I accept the nomination to run for president or do I say no. Clearly you can see which path I chose. So here I am on a new leg of my trail and I can already say that I have chosen the harder trail. I assume that it is steeper with more twists and turns, but it also guarantees spectacular views along the way. My job this year is to lead. To me this means that I need to be open and honest with you. I need to have the confidence and courage to do the right thing, even when it may be unpopular. I need to be accountable to you. I need to deliver on my commitments. I need to trust you, the members of NSGC and I need you to trust me. I need to rely on you to bring your energy and creativity to the table so we can get to where we want to be. This journey has provided me with so much more than I could have imagined. I have met people along the way who are amazing. They have taught me, inspired me, pushed me, supported me, sustained me and saw qualities in me that I had not seen in myself. My life is richer because of these experiences. I have a deeper understanding of our profession, our challenges, and our strengths. It has opened my eyes to all that we can do as genetic counselors. Join me and let's make NSGC's journey equally rewarding, exciting and enriching!

Thank you.