

Response by Margaret Harris to the ARNOVA Distinguished Achievement and Leadership in Nonprofit and Voluntary Action Research Award – 18 November 2011

It would be hard for me to exaggerate how privileged I feel to be receiving this award. To be recognised by my own academic peers as having made a contribution to our field is a tremendous honour. But my sense of excitement is increased many times over because this award is given by ARNOVA and because the people within the ARNOVA community who made the decision about the Award this year are people whose own work and judgement I hold in the highest esteem.

My immediate thought on hearing that I was to be honoured in this way was to think about those who have helped me to climb to this peak over the thirty years of my academic career. Having spent the first part of my working life at the practitioner grassroots in local government and the voluntary sector, I benefitted enormously from the many people whose wise counsel enabled me to get to grips quickly with the demands of academia – my teachers of course but also my academic colleagues, administrative staff, voluntary sector practitioners, funders and many graduate students.

Here – in order not to detain you for long - I would like to focus on how many of these special people are ones I met through ARNOVA and its predecessor AVAS. And I want to salute ARNOVA itself as a membership association for all that it has given me.

I attended my first annual meeting of AVAS in 1987 in Kansas City. At that time I was a very junior researcher with no serious publications to boast of. And yet I was treated with friendliness and courtesy. I felt warmly welcomed into what was then a small but expanding circle of specialist non-profit scholars. My paper presentation was listened to with respect and commented upon with care. I was offered advice on improving my work but it was offered in supportive and positive language. Most thrilling of all was that I found

myself presenting my work alongside senior scholars of the non-profit field whose publications I had read, admired and cited.

When I returned in subsequent years I found that this experience was not simply a product of American politeness towards a new Brit on the block. Rather it was deeply embedded within the ARNOVA community. What a joy! I soon found that planning my presentations to the following year's conference was part of the annual cycle of my academic year; and that I was becoming a member of a network of smart scholars who also embodied in their own associational lives some of the best caring and philanthropic values of the third sector.

Later I found that working with ARNOVA colleagues to plan conferences, develop organisational strategy, edit journals, and develop research proposals was not a chore but could be one of the high spots of academic life. In short my experience has been that ARNOVA is a true 'best practice' model of how an academic association ought to work – with generosity of spirit, team work, mutual support and mutual respect as foundational values. If my academic career flourished it was in large part to do with my ARNOVA links.

Perhaps some of you are wondering why I am making such a big 'song and dance' about ARNOVA's positive qualities when there is so much else I could reflect on at this advanced stage in my career. But others will know only too well that support and encouragement for colleagues is indeed of special note because it is not necessarily the norm within academic institutions and academic associations. On the contrary, during my career, I have seen elsewhere practices and attitudes which fall far short of the standards I witnessed in Kansas City and subsequent ARNOVA activities. Sadly, many of you will be familiar with the kind of thing – neglect of junior colleagues; vicious competition for resources; casually broken promises; personal jealousies; rampant individualism.

As was recently shown in a UK report on care for the elderly, professional people can incrementally 'lose the plot'. In the case of hospital nurses in the

UK, it was found that institutional emphasis on task completion, technical competence and personal career progress had gradually eroded their basic human instinct to be caring to sick and vulnerable people; originally the very core of their vocation. Incredibly, it is being said that nurses now needing training in 'human empathy'.

In like manner, it seems to me, academics are also in danger of losing the professional plot. Left unchecked the cut-throat behavioural norms of some academic institutions and associations will incrementally erode the fundamental rationale of scholarly endeavour: to develop new and useful knowledge and to nurture the next generation of students.

Yet my own encounters within ARNOVA have shown me that there is another way of being an academic, even in these straitened economic times; a way which values co-workers in the field and welcomes in newcomers; a way in which dealings between colleagues are honest, open and supportive; and a way in which the tricks of the trade are willingly passed along to new cohorts of scholars.

I do hope that by articulating some of ARNOVA's special qualities I can encourage everybody here to think of herself or himself as a guardian of this great association we have built together. As the organisation continues to grow and change, I hope that we can all feel responsible for ensuring that the collegiate values it embodies are not only sustained but also strengthened.

So, with these thoughts, let me say 'Happy Birthday' and a very big 'thank you' to ARNOVA as an association - and thank you to every one of you who has guided and supported me over my academic career and enabled me to reach the dizzy heights of this very special Award.

Margaret Harris

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