

Transcript of Rai Interview Part 5: ASH Leadership

Gerald Marti: Well, moving now from iwCLL, I know that you have been very actively involved with ASH. And your involvement with ASH, you were vice president. You were president-elect. You were president and I assume that you're functioning now in a past president capacity. How did that come about?

Kanti Rai: That's a very happy and important chapter in my career. I'm very proud of that because, well, first of all let me tell you that there is no such thing as past president. ASH has a very good tradition. ASH cultivates its leadership and brings them to a level of responsibility and prestige. As you pointed out, that once you are elected by the general membership to become vice president, then you remain vice president for one year, then you become president-elect for one year and then you become president for one year. After that, you just jump off the cliff and disappear because this way, ASH protects itself from any threat of developing personality cults.

So, once you've done your job, thank you very much, you go away. And next level of leadership takes over, and this has been very healthy. And I feel that most other successful institutions must emulate that tradition.

How did this happen? Well, I must say that I've been a very faithful member of ASH. Ever since Cronkite and Sawitsky introduced me to ASH membership, I found that it was an extremely stimulating relationship. It was really—the meetings were first class, the level of abstracts at all ASH meetings, ever since I've been going there and I've been going there for more than 45, 46 years, maybe all the 50 years. And I found that the association, the excitement of new information was very, very important.

And I became—or I was asked in a couple of occasions to organize CLL sessions, educational sessions, and my paper submitted was accepted for plenary sessions. So that I found the whole association so stimulating and rewarding that one time my name was proposed for election on the executive committee, which is nominating committee names, some candidates, and out of a number of candidates a few positions are vacant—available. And lo and behold, I was elected, I think it was in 2002 or 2003, to the executive committee. And I had no idea how the organization was run. And to become a member of the executive committee, it was really a first inside view of—and this was a large professional organization, highly respected for the quality of its standards, etc.

And I became very, very fascinated by the excellence that the institution's organization has always maintaining its—all its operations: scientific, organizational, administrative, public relations. And during my tenure on the committee—executive committee—I found that I became progressively more vocal, involved, and active. And I enjoyed it, and I think my colleagues who were with me enjoyed my participation. I did not do anything remarkably dramatic, but it seems, people told me later that whenever I opened my mouth, I had something substantial to contribute to say and it was noticed by other people so that by the time that my tenure on the executive committee was coming to an end, I was nominated for the vice president's position and I had zero interest and zero expectations.

When I was growing up as a young hematologist, whosoever was the president of ASH, I held that person in my mind on a pedestal, as "my God, this person must know so much and he must be so wonderful" and all that. So, it never occurred—when my own mentor, Gene Cronkite was the president, I had a great degree of reflected glory because ASH presidency was a big deal in our profession of hematology. That really carries something. So, when Gene was the president and he invited us to the hotel—this was the San Francisco Congress—and he invited us to the Presidential Suite in the hotel, my God, it was like a palace. I said, "ah, this is something which you can aspire to but never expect." I never expected.

I am a boy from a back village of India, and to make it into American society in hematology was a big deal for me but never did I in my remote dreams expect that I would be chosen and elevated to the level that I never had dreamed of. So when I was elected, I was absolutely flabbergasted because when the nominating committee chair called me on the phone—they have to get your permission whether you would be willing to let your name be on the ballot because when you are on a ballot, you have even chance of not making it—and I said, what the hell, why not, because this in itself is enough reward to go for me for my lifetime that I was considered to be a vice presidential candidate. That's enough.

So, I called the other person who was also the vice president [nominee]. I said, "listen buddy, I have zero interest or expectation and I know that you are interested and you are more competent and capable, so I wish you all the best" and that was it. And then lo and behold, the surprise information came when the ballots were counted that I won it. So, I called my counterpart and said, what happened, you know, I did not. He said, "you didn't want to be, and you are now it and I wanted to be?" We were very friendly and very gracious. He was very gracious.

So, then I had tenure of a progressive leadership and it was a wonderful experience. It was humbling because it is very reassuring, but it is frightening because you don't want to make a fool of yourself. And I'm grateful that that whole tenure of vice president, president-elect and president were all the years of great degree of commitment to the profession, meeting different people outside the field, meeting Congressional leaders and the Senate and the House, meeting insurance people, the Blue Shield/Blue Cross people. Everywhere where the hematologist life is involved, be it in research, or NHLBI, NCI, NIH, we went there and talked to people and they received us with a great degree of respect because we represent the professional group.

So, it was really an extraordinary experience and I'm most grateful for that opportunity because not many of us have that chance in life and now that it is done, I am equally happy that I am a private citizen.

Marti: So, it was, was it seven years on the Executive Committee and then one year...

Rai: No, no, three or four years on the Executive Committee and three years on this—yeah.

Marti: Okay.

Rai: Yeah. It must have been about 2006, so minus seven, 1999 must have been my start of executive...

Marti: But quite an experience with public leadership in hematology.

Rai: Oh yes, absolutely.