Leadership in Difficult Times

This year’s International Women’s Day recognizes the important leadership role women have played and continue to play in responding to the health, economic, and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global community.

And while the 2021 celebration has a very long theme (Women in Leadership: Achieving an Equal Future in a COVID-19 World), it speaks directly to Barbara Caffery’s experience in 2020 leading the American Academy of Optometry through difficult decisions and situations surrounding the viability of hosting its annual meeting in Nashville.

As it became increasingly clear last spring COVID-19 was more than a short-term medical event and becoming a full-fledged pandemic, Caffery, president of the Board of Directors at the time, the Board, and the Academy leadership team had to find a way to quickly produce the optometry profession’s most well-regarded educational event in a safe, timely, and accessible manner. In addition to the loss of continuing education, networking, and revenue, there were deep concerns about the ethics of holding an in-person meeting with so much uncertainty about the pandemic around the globe.

“There was a sense of sadness. This is an organization whose members genuinely like each other and find great benefit in the comradery of the event,” she said. “Our challenge became how to capture that feeling, along with continuing education, exhibits, events, etc., and make it a rewarding experience.”

While the pressure was on, Caffery and the team developed a well-received virtual event attracting more than 6,400 attendees from 50 plus countries. Additionally, the Academy delivered 300 hours of continuing education in 235 sessions during a 14-day period.
This wasn’t Caffery’s first time leading the organization to success. Under her leadership, the Academy developed a comprehensive four-year strategic plan in 2019.

“It was time for big picture thinking. We were ready to go places we’d never gone before,” she said. “It was the right time, right place, and right people. They were dedicated to making it work and work well.”

“Our success was a result of the dedication of the people around me,” she continued. “It was thrilling — I lived out a dream of seeing the strategic plan adopted.”

When asked about what counsel she would give to women interested in attaining career and community leadership positions, she quickly pointed to the example set by the late United States Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

“She had a way of speaking clearly and simply. Of synthesizing information in a way to set the stage for productive discussion and advancing the important issues.”

Caffery also advises, “Walk your talk — you have to be the one who does the extra work. And you have to fail badly. Cry your tears and express your regret. You have 10 minutes, then pick yourself up, and move on.”

In regards to this year’s International Women’s Day, Caffery is disappointed at the inability to celebrate in person with her friends, colleagues, and women from all walks of life in Toronto. Usually they gather to recognize each other’s achievements and the vital role women play in their communities, countries, and the world.

However, there is still much to celebrate in 2021. An initiative of UN Women, International Women’s Day occurs each year on March 8 to honor the tremendous efforts by women and girls around the world in shaping a more equal future.

This year’s theme, Women in Leadership: Achieving an Equal Future in a COVID-19 World, recognizes the special role women have played during the COVID-19 crisis. A UN Women press release says, “Women stand at the front lines of the crisis, as healthcare workers, caregivers, innovators, community organizers, and as some of the most exemplary and effective national leaders combatting the pandemic. The crisis has highlighted both the centrality of their contributions and the disproportionate burdens women carry.

“Women leaders and women’s organizations have demonstrated their skills, knowledge, and networks to effectively lead in COVID-19 response and recovery efforts. Today there is more acceptance than ever before that women bring different experiences, perspectives, and skills to the table and make irreplaceable contributions to decisions, policies, and laws that work better for all.”