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An Unusually High Number of State Directors Have a Story Featuring a Moose.



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You've been mastering NEMA leadership roles for a while now, what would you tell someone who knows very little about the association what NEMA is all about?

Well, I don't think I have "mastered" NEMA leadership roles. I do believe that NEMA brings a lot to the table and can be very beneficial to state directors. We hold a lot of power collectively to persuade change at FEMA. I think we undervalue that collective ability. Through NEMA we can determine how we want FEMA programs to operate and petition our state congressional delegates to support our recommendations. We need to ensure our voices are heard and we are influencing change that enhances our ability to help our citizens. NEMA is a great resource to help new emergency managers navigate the complex FEMA programs and processes.

What is the best thing to happen (so far) in your lead of director of Arkansas DEM?

I have an outstanding team at ADEM and we have done some remarkable things over the past six years. We have led the way in PSAP (Public Service/Safety Answering Points) consolidation and helped draft and pass legislation that doubled the amount of funds going out to local PSAPs. About two years ago, The Arkansas Wireless Information Network, the state land mobile radio systems, was moved to ADEM and we immediately increased funding and secured a bond issue that resulted in a fifty plus million dollar upgrade. We passed legislation that doubled the amount of state funding for mitigation. We secured special funding to help cover cost for EMAC missions so it would not negatively impact our budget, allowing us to quickly deploy ADEM team members in support of EMAC missions.

Emergency management plays a key role in every aspect of Arkansas state government and as the director, I have been appointed to almost all the Governor's committees and task forces, including school safety, infrastructure and cyber security. It has been an honor working with this team and working with the best Governor in the nation, Asa Hutchinson, who led the state through the pandemic and ending with a state surplus of over 1.6 billion dollars. In the past six years, we have responded to seven federal disasters, including the pandemic and record-breaking flooding on the Arkansas River in addition to numerous state disasters.

You have done a tremendous service for your hometown Conway, Arkansas. Beginning a law enforcement career that led to being the first from Conway to attend and graduate from the FBI National Academy to becoming the Chief of Police. You didn't venture far from home to earn your Master's in Public Administration at Arkansas State University. What is the one thing that makes you the proudest to live in and around Conway?

Conway had a population of around 20,000 when I started my law enforcement career and had grown to around 80,000 when I retired as police chief. I am proud that as a Captain, I started the CALEA process and that the two chiefs that followed, I mentored along the way and watched rise through the ranks at the department. Conway is known as the city of colleges and roundabouts but it's a great city that still has that hometown feel.

While Conway is a great place to live and I enjoyed the time I lived in Conway, I now reside outside of the city in the country. My wife, and love of my life for 30 years, just built our last house on three acres. We are enjoying the peace and quiet of country living.

We celebrate times to 'unplug' . . .well, as much as one can being in emergency management. You appreciate the outdoors with major fishing trips. What has been the best trip so far? And how big was that fish?

The past two years I have fished the waters of Wyoming. Last year I spent two days fly fishing one of its many rivers and lakes. The best one was wade fishing with a guide on private land, spent the day and did not see another human.

We did walk up on a momma moose and for a short time we were between her and her calf, she was not happy with us. I did snap a picture of her as we were easing out of her way. If they found me trampled, I wanted someone to have a picture of the assailant.

As much as I love fishing, I also love traveling with my wife. We have recently traveled to Scotland, Ireland, France and England and have also been to Cuba. We are looking forward to more trips including a planned trip next July to Iceland.

What would be your favorite summertime family story?

Actually, one of the best family trips was this past weekend, we camped on the Little Red River in Arkansas, another great trout river, and spent time with two of my three children, three of my four grandchildren and my new daughter-in-law just relaxing on Greers Ferry Lake, and fly fishing on the river. I love those times when all my family are with me.

A Venetian Honeymoon
by Rhonda Johnson-Saunders

*A gondola floats o'er romantic tides
as you and I caress Venetian skies
laced deftly in exalted stars applied
by brushes dipped in hues of lover's eyes.*

*A kiss beneath Rialto Bridge in spring
feels like our first so many years ago.
On every breeze, O Sole Mio sings
a serenade in city lights aglow.*

*This hope of love rekindled miles from home,
could be our chance to dream and reminisce.
Enlightened by a full moon's wink, we'd roam
down Grand Canal in gleaming nights of bliss.*

*Our renaissance, a second honeymoon -
to Venice, we could not escape too soon.*

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