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Stephanie F. Aleong: A Tribute to a Natural Leader

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STEPHANIE F. ALEONG: A TRIBUTE TO A NATURAL LEADER

CARSTEN EVANS

It was April of 2005 when I entered the Barnes & Noble on South University Drive in Plantation. My eyes were immediately drawn towards the red-orange covered book on the top level of the promotional display counter for just-released books. The title screamed at me “*Dangerous Doses!*” Then the subtitle catch phrase, “*How Counterfeiters Are Contaminating America’s Drug Supply,*” squealed even. I opened it to find that it was not only about America, but more specifically how South Florida was contaminating America’s drug supply. The book would have a major influence over me regarding my profession—pharmacy—more than any other that I have read before or since. I even personally knew some of the good and bad characters in the book.

My job title is Assistant Dean in the College of Pharmacy at Nova Southeastern University in Ft. Lauderdale. One of my responsibilities includes educating working pharmacists through providing live, continuing professional education (CE) programs throughout the year. These programs are continuing education for mandatory license renewals. It is my incumbent responsibility to know what is happening within the profession and to provide speakers/forums with the focused vision to address the pertinent issues of current interest at scheduled CE offerings several times a year. To do this, I research the best topics and speakers for the subjects. This includes bringing speakers from Canada and from around the United States to our campus.

I found myself unable to come to a stopping point when I started reading this book, *Dangerous Doses* by Katherine Eban.¹ How could I have missed hearing about all of this vital information regarding the safety of medications that were being dispensed all around my little world in South Florida? I was so embarrassed for my lack of knowledge, and yet, at the same time so thankful of learning about the knowledge so vital to all patients around the United States who potentially were taking counterfeit medications. This book had given me the idea for the keynote speaker for my next meeting—Katherine Eban, the book’s author.

After going back and forth with her New York agent, they settled on a \$5,000 plus expenses fee for her one hour appearance (maybe not even a

1. KATHERINE EBAN, *DANGEROUS DOSES: HOW COUNTERFEITERS ARE CONTAMINATING AMERICA’S DRUG SUPPLY* (2005).

lecture). My budget could bear a \$2,000 honorarium, but not the big bucks of corporate America. I scanned my alternatives to Katherine. The likely choice would be the “star” of the book—the person whose courage and strength put the bad guys in jail—Stephanie Feldman.

According to the book, Stephanie Feldman was the five-foot nothing live character who coordinated the investigations of drug counterfeiting through her office, Florida Health Care Fraud. She was the statewide prosecutor and was described in the book as being a character like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. From the book I determined that she was the one person who felt the strong responsibility of making the medications in this country safe. As I found out later, this was one of her primary passions in life that drove her professionally every day. She took counterfeiting Americans with bad expensive drugs personally and could not understand why everybody did not fight or care about keeping medications from being laced with these contaminants. So Stephanie became my new “mark” for the keynote speaker for the upcoming CE program. Now I had to find her. The book ended with her leaving the Florida taskforce and moving to Atlanta to work at the Emory Law School. I felt good about this information and knew that it was going to be easy to locate her.

Two weeks after my first calls, I finally hit somewhat of a jackpot. I found a lady who used to work with Stephanie in the same department. She asked me to repeat my name and where I was calling from, while using a huge question mark-like statement. I knew something unusual was about to happen. When I repeated what she wanted to know, she laughed at me. She told me she knew Stephanie well and then stated, “She works at Nova Southeastern University—right where you are calling from.” For the second time since I found this book, I had this instant mixed emotion of being so embarrassed for my lack of knowledge, and yet at the same time so thankful of learning about the knowledge so vital to me. I thanked her and set out to meet Professor Feldman.

My first call to extension 6230 was to verify that Stephanie Feldman was there—now I learned that her name was Aleong—and to ask her if I could come over immediately and meet her. She said yes and I did. As I discussed who I was and what I wanted, I did not find a monster-like law enforcer who fought crime with the intimidation and power of the legal system. Instead, I found an attractive young lady that had the largest heart and compassion for doing the right things in life. She articulated the need for pedigree documentation for drug management in this country. She was providing me with an instant learning curve and with a breath of professional fresh air. She was a great example of why students come to class on time. It also was apparent in this brief meeting why all the investigators that worked with her in the past wanted to adopt her. She was a winner in what I would call the

“friend-for-life” club. People who are in this club are so good at what they do and believe in life that they seem unreal. That was Stephanie Feldman Aleong from the first time I met her.

Stephanie became a regular at our continuing education meetings in South Florida and eventually was recognized around the country as a safety expert through her articles and lectures at national safety meetings in various other professional circles. She lectured on medication symbology (e.g. bar-coding) methods that would enhance inventory control and safety. She served on advisory boards and wrote articles focused on pedigree enforcement. Stephanie visited with Florida Governor Jed Bush in Tallahassee on the subject and spent her own money, despite his political opposition to it. It was her passion in life to advance patient safety to the level where people could get the medication that they thought they were getting. How simple was that?

Regardless of the many unbelievable opposing factors, Stephanie had many supporters in her convictions. Cesar Arias and Dr. Gene Odin were two South Florida pharmacy inspectors who shared the exact same expectations of “doing the right things in life.” There were many others as well, especially those associated in “Operation Stone Cold.” This was her team and she was their hero. (Please read the book.) In her short lifetime, she gained the respect of all of those who understood and valued the word “integrity.”

For all the great safety awareness offerings that Stephanie Feldman Aleong brought to the healthcare profession, the College of Pharmacy created a recognition award in her honor one month after she died. The award honors those who reflect the attributes that Stephanie practiced in her passion to do the right things. The award reads, “Recognizing individuals whose unique efforts have significantly advanced patient safety,” and is housed in a showcase on the third floor of the College of Pharmacy. It is an annual award that is presented at the year’s largest gathering of pharmacists in South Florida.

The first “Stephanie F. Aleong, J.D., National Patient Safety Award” went to the two pharmacist inspectors who worked closely with her, Cesar Arias and Gene Odin. They shared the highest respect for each other in the most difficult of difficult times. The book outlines the many behavioral challenges they survived. The second award, this past November, was presented to Stephanie Shubat, who is responsible for the approval of all U.S. nonproprietary names through the United States Adopted Names Program (USAN). Her efforts synthesize the expertise of the American Medical Association (AMA), the United States Pharmacopeia Convention (USP), the American Pharmacists Association (APHA), and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in order to ensure that drug information is communicated accurately

and unambiguously in an assigned drug name. Ms. Shubat also helps coordinate international nomenclature through close liaison with the World Health Organization's INN Program. During her tenure as Director of the USAN program, Ms. Shubat presided over modifications to the nomenclature schemes for up-and-coming biologics including monoclonal antibodies and cell therapies. Besides having the name Stephanie in common, many personality attributes (sense of urgency, doing the right thing) and mental attributes (integrity, honesty) were shared.

We like to teach "leadership" in the College of Pharmacy to all of our students. I am sure that goes on for all of the colleges within the Health Professions Division and around the campus, as we need leaders to get things done the right way. For a few people on earth "leadership" comes natural. Stephanie was a natural leader. Through her special efforts, she protected the people we love most in this world.

