



Thanks to the extraordinary commitment and expertise of AHLA leaders, the American Health Lawyers Association continues to thrive and serve as the essential health law resource in the nation. The Association's strong foundation reflects a history that is vibrant, meaningful and worth sharing. Finding a way to preserve AHLA's history was especially relevant in light of the Association's 50th Anniversary, which was celebrated throughout 2017.

This transcript reflects a conversation between AHLA leaders that was conducted via audio interview as part of the Association's History Project. More than 60 of AHLA's Fellows and Past Presidents were interviewed. A video documentary was also prepared and debuted on June 26 during AHLA's 2017 Annual Meeting in San Francisco, CA.

October 5, 2017

JD Epstein interviewing Greg Duckett:

JD: Hello Greg, good afternoon.

Greg: Hey, good afternoon JD, how are you doing, sir?

JD: I'm fine, I know you're a busy man, so let's get started. This is JD Epstein and I'm a Past President and Fellow. It's my pleasure to interview for this oral history project of the AHLA, Greg Duckett. Greg is the senior vice president, chief legal officer and corporate secretary for Baptist Memorial HealthCare Corporation in Memphis, Tennessee.

With that introduction, I noted Greg, that you have been in that position for I think, about 25 years, the way I count it.

Greg: Actually, I'm going on 26 years now.

JD: How did you get into healthcare? A little background, if you would, for the interview.

Greg: I can honestly say I stumbled into healthcare and what I mean by that is, I started my professional career straight out of law school, working for United States Senator Al Gore at the time. Worked with him for three years, becoming his state counsel, then I went to work with the city of Memphis for four years, starting as the director of public service, becoming director of housing and community development, then the city of Memphis's chief administrative officer at the age of 31. I was the youngest and first African-American appointed to that position.

And then fall of 1991, had a little old thing known as an election occur, over 247,000 people voted in that election, and the mayor who appointed me. We lost that election by 142 votes and I found myself wondering from a career perspective, where do I go next?

And as a result of which, had a number of offers and friends who were trying to provide me some guidance on career choices, posts, my public service days, and one of those choices was Baptist Healthcare Corporation. Met with the leadership here at Baptist and at that time, ironically, I came on board initially as VP of community and government operations for the organization.

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In 1992, six months into that stay, I began then responsible for risk management insurance functions, and in 1994, I was promoted to senior vice president and named the corporate counsel for Baptist Healthcare Corporation.

So that's in a nutshell, how I ended up in healthcare, but I was not initially in terms of a career path, seeking healthcare as an area of practice that I wanted to go in. But I ultimately learned of the opportunity and it has been a very rewarding opportunity.

JD: Okay, I mean, you are clearly one of the premier institutions in the mid-South and obviously, over the last 25 years, have had opportunity to participate in the American Health Lawyers Association, both from the standpoint of the education as well as the leadership and the networking. Could you talk a little bit about this last 25 years and the role that all these things have played in your career at Baptist?

Greg: I can honestly say without the help and support of the American Health Lawyers Association, I would not be where I am now, in terms of the growth within the healthcare space. I specifically have had two individuals that initially encouraged my participation in the American Health Lawyers Association.

One of which is Max Shelton, lawyer here in Memphis, who heads up one of the major health law firms, locally. And the other is a Dick Cowart, who is known nationally for his work in the healthcare space. And it was through the two of them that I began getting my initial immersion in health law.

Dick Cowart, I have to take my hat off to him, because he also made it a personal, I'll say goal of his, to get me involved both in the educational teaching side of classes with AHLA and on the governance side of AHLA. It was through Dick, not only did I become active in practice group activities, but also I ended up serving on the board of the American Health Lawyers Association.

So I am deeply appreciative of the role that both of those individuals have played in getting me initially involved, but it goes beyond that. The networking opportunity that have developed over the years have been invaluable. There have been issues that I am not the subject matter expert on, but through relationships that I have developed with individuals who are members of AHLA, I have been able to call and utilize their services to further enhance the operations of Baptist Healthcare Corporation.

JD: Through the educational programs, Greg, I know you participated in both, in terms of committees, as well as speaking from time to time. How do you relate those opportunities to the younger people coming up, both in-house as you are and from the private practice, in terms of the importance of the AHLA education programs?

Greg: A word that I'll probably over-utilize as part of these interviews is invaluable. One of the things that I share with individuals who want to get started in health law is, please take advantage of the fundamentals of health law sessions that are given on an annual basis by the American Health Lawyers Association. It is a tremendous opportunity to basically see the waterfront of the basics in healthcare. Once you have gone through that, it then provides you the opportunities with the annual meetings to then stay abreast of the leading issues and developments that occur.

So whether you are in-house just as I am, or in private practice, to me, there is no substitute for the educational offerings of the American Health Lawyers Association and I strongly advocate and encourage members of my legal team here to attend. And also, any of the law firms that we work, with as a matter of fact, the majority if not all of what I'll call the major law firms that work with Baptist, do in fact, in one capacity or the other, attend the annual meetings of the American Health Lawyers Association.

JD: Greg, I know one of the areas in which you have been very prominent in the AHLA and obviously in your life has been the issue of diversity. Having been in the AHLA or its predecessor for almost 45 years, I know for a fact, the tremendous amount of effort that's put into the diversity effort and has been over the last few years, would you spend just a couple minutes talking about that and the importance of it to you?

Greg: Thank you and I'll be glad to speak to diversity and I'll start with the premise of, to the extent that I commit any of my volunteer time to any activities, it focuses on one of three events. Either economic development, diversity or education. And when I first got active in the American Health Lawyers Association, there was not much diversity in the ranks of health lawyers. However, the association has made it a concerted effort on its part to change that fact and I commend the Association for doing it in a proactive sense.

And I remember when the diversity reception was small and you could count the number of participants, probably on two or three hands, and now the makeup of the overall conferences, there are a number of diverse individuals participating in those conferences. And I guess the thing that speaks volumes for AHLA, it realized just as I try to advocate, that diversity doesn't just happen.

Diversity is the direct result of the conscious effort of others to ensure that whatever entity or activity that we are a part of, there is a conscious effort to ensure that it is as inclusive as possible. And I have seen firsthand where the American Health Lawyers Association has gone out of its way to make sure that it has diverse membership and involvement at all levels of its ranks.

JD: Greg, I know that again, I appreciate the time you're spending here, but I guess I would like to finish this interview with ... we're really giving you an open end. If there's any sort of advice or counsel to the future leaders, to the future of healthcare, health law practitioners and the AHLA, just very open-ended, if you have something you'd like to do as a conclusion.

Greg: Yeah, the main thing that I would like to say as the concluding thought is remember first and foremost, we as lawyers, are here to serve and we are here to serve the clients that we represent. The American Health Lawyers Association gives us the tools necessary to be fierce advocates for our clients, but we can only be a fierce advocate if we understand the importance of service. And at the end of the day, that is what the American Health Lawyers Association is all about. And that is what we, as individual lawyers, should always remember.

JD: Greg, thank you for your time, on behalf of the AHLA and its leadership. I do appreciate you taking this time and wish you the best.

Greg: All right, thank you JD, I appreciate it. Bye-bye.