



A lively day-by-day description of our conference in San Francisco.

Day 1: Monday, Feb. 22, 2010

I Left My Heart in San Francisco

The hundreds of business officers who descended on The Fairmont Hotel today came from many different backgrounds, states, schools, and situations—but they all have one thing in common: they LOVE The Fairmont Hotel. Completed in 1907, the hotel has housed everyone from Ella Fitzgerald to Bill Clinton, and its magnificent Venetian Room (site of NBOA's Vendor Hall and Reception) was where Tony Bennett first crooned "I Left My Heart in San Francisco."

Participants loved exploring the extraordinary nooks and crannies of this elegant place—from the rows of photographs of famous visitors to the incredible Tonga Room, which provides musical entertainment in its mid-restaurant pool (business officer Ann Poundstone said that she was afraid the band, which sang exuberantly to diners from a moving boat, might capsize). A good number of the hotel's 500-plus rooms were taken up by NBOA Symposium participants, all of whom seem delighted to be here, reconnecting with old friends and making new ones. Said Tameeka Aviles of TIAA-CREF, "When I see a blue NBOA lanyard around someone's neck, I smile—I just know that person's going to be friendly. I love meeting all these new people."

On the Waterfront

Symposium officially kicked off on Sunday night with an incredible cocktail reception at The Ferry Building sponsored by Stone & Youngberg, TIAA-CREF, and Bolton & Company. This stunning architectural marvel provided a festive backdrop for mingling and catching up, which conference participants did in spades, before dispersing into the foggy night to explore the famed Italian restaurants of North Beach. I caught up with some of NBOA's "far-flung correspondents," including Alistair Dry of St. John's College in South Africa and Hemant Dutia of The American International School of Muscat in Oman. When I asked them why they had traveled so many miles to be here, they both said that attending the NBOA conference gave them concrete skills and tools to take back to their schools at home, as well as the precious chance to network with others in the field. Alistair said that at last year's conference, he had been struck by the knowledge he had gained at the credit-card-processing goldmine presented by Diamond Mind, which he had implemented at his school upon his return. "It's those unexpected gems," he said, "that make this experience so special."

Good Morning!

For many on East Coast time, Monday morning kicked off at 5am when the lobby coffee kiosk opened for business. After caffeination and catching up, a throng of business officers put on their lanyards and thinking caps and headed into morning sessions. I caught up with several people at lunch who had attended "Understanding the Consequences: Financial Modeling and Strategic Decision-Making," presented by Chuck Procknow, Alexandra Iseman, and Julia Donnelly of George K. Baum & Company. These folks had spent the morning learning how to use customized financial models to solve the problems of ACME College Preparatory School, a fictitious institution used as a case study to get seminar participants to walk through potential budget

actions. I also spoke with several business officers who raved about “The Never-Ending Story: Continued Flux in the Capital Markets,” presented by Dirk ten Grotenhuis of Stone & Youngberg. This seminar delved deep into current municipal market conditions, discussing how last year’s crisis had been liquidity, while this year’s was credit (“What exactly am I buying?”). The room buzzed with questions and answers about BABs (Build America Bonds) and SIFMA, the national index for variable rate bonds. Finally, I bumped into an old friend in the hallway who was gushing about Michele Sparrow’s seminar on auxiliary revenue: “Adding to the Bottom Line: Maximizing Summer and After-School Revenue.” Sparrow’s incredible tutoring program at The Hill Center in Durham, NC, has brought in an unprecedented amount of outside revenue, and she shared the secrets of her success with all in the room, including requiring tutors to sign a non-compete agreement and creating an incentive program for working additional hours.

Where Do We Go from Here?

The afternoon brought the continuation of my “think-tank” session with my esteemed colleague Jim Honan, a Senior Lecturer on Education at the Harvard Graduate School. Jim and I spent nearly six hours digging deep into the issues of the business officers who attended the session, and identifying the roadblocks business officers experience in trying to become strategic partners at their schools. We worked to help participants reconstruct their narrative from “person whose accomplishments are invisible” to “person who ensures financial sustainability for the institution.” Working with Jim’s Kellogg Logic Model, we moved from a discussion of Activities (what we do to get to where we want to be) to Output (the results we can count) to Outcomes (the results we can describe) to Impact (the high-level difference we make in our spheres). It was an exciting seminar, and we look forward to sharing the whitepaper it inspired in the weeks to come.

Feeling Venetian

The evening wrapped up with our popular Vendor Hall and Reception in the ornate Venetian Room, where 40 corporate supporters of NBOA networked with business officers and discussed their unique products and services. I tried to rub shoulders with as many people as possible, and ended up overhearing terrific conversations that exemplified this conference’s theme of Building Bridges and Sharing Solutions. Solutions were definitely shared in the Venetian Room today—on everything from computer software to sound investing to environmentally sustainable construction.

A few people told me they’d been able to get a little sight-seeing in between sessions, and recommended that I check out the cable car museum if I had the chance. I doubt I will—as much as I’m curious about the experiences San Francisco has to offer, I’m most energized by the people within the walls of this hotel—they’re treasured friends and inspiring colleagues, and there’s no place else I’d rather be.

If you’re reading this from far away, please know that you’re a part of this community too. I’m thrilled to be able to connect with all of you—in person and online. I look forward to sharing stories again tomorrow!

Best,
Sarah

Day 2: Tuesday, Feb. 23, 2010

Welcome to the Future

Our morning started bright and early with a summons to the future. [David Zach](#), “one of the few professionally trained futurists on this planet,” led us through a thought-provoking presentation about the world we are shaping for the next generation to inherit. He noted that as we go through change, we navigate with fads, trends, and principles. Unfortunately, he said, too often we are “seduced by fads, ignorant of trends, and resistant to principles.” His recommendation? “Play with fads, work with trends, live by principles.” His talk was full of nuggets of wisdom, some statistical (13-to-17-year olds send 1,742 text messages a month), some sound-byte-i-cal (“customers are becoming co-workers”), and some emotional (“if you work on a computer, you touch your computer more than anything else in your life”). After presenting, he signed copies of his new [book](#), a collection of some of his favorite quotations, including a new favorite of mine: “The universe is full of magical things, patiently waiting for our wits to grow sharper.” –Eden Phillpots

Brains A-Buzz

Business officers left the future and came to the present, participating in focused sessions on everything from “Battling the Bond Financing Blues” to “What Goes Down Should Come Up: Independent School Endowments.” When I stopped by the latter, led by [Commonfund](#)’s John Griswold, I was informed that some of our members have been looking for the latest version of Commonfund’s fantastic annual endowment report, a benchmarking study of endowment growth. The 2010 report is available free for members [right here](#). Armed with useful tools from these morning sessions, business officers marched into lunch in the elegant Venetian Room, and traded stories of their experiences. I sat next to one young business officer (attending her first Symposium), who said that she was the first business officer ever hired by the school, and that she’d had to create the business office from scratch, including transitioning the school to an automated payroll system (from an, er, writing-on-legal-pad “system”). Back at work, she’d been looking for guidance in creating a policy and procedures manual, and found it at NBOA’s Symposium! Stories like this warm my heart and keep NBOA aware of what’s important to you. Keep telling us what you need!

The Top Challenges You’re Facing

Our afternoon general session was led by industry powerhouse Janice Abraham, CEO of [United Educators](#) (“Education’s Own Insurance Company”). She spoke about the biggest risk management challenges currently facing independent schools, and walked us through real lawsuits she’s seen on campuses across the country. It was a sobering but provocative talk about sexual molestation on campus (40% of alleged molesters are non-staff, non-faculty volunteers), bullying (50% of the bullying claims her company receives are from middle schools), and employment discrimination (“gender” is the #1 discrimination issue in independent schools, followed by “age”). She spoke about what she sees as a growing competitor for our industry—charter schools—noting their rapid growth in various regions across the country (225,000 students are currently enrolled in charter schools in California). She answered questions about background checks for parents (“it’s tough, but it sends the right message”), the state of the insurance industry (“we’re in a soft market right now and I predict flat insurance premiums”), and the future viability of the independent school model (“you don’t want to hear this, but mergers may be in your future”).

A Night to Remember

After an amazing and heart-rate-accelerating Goldmines session (NBOA's answer to speed-dating), I changed from my suit to my fancy shoes and took a schoolbus through the rainy streets of San Francisco to the lovely Bently Reserve, site of our Annual Dinner. Wow—what an incredible night! I have to say, I have been dreading the prospect of being “feted” and having to make it through my speech without breaking down into tears. I had everything and nothing to worry about. I was deeply moved by the incredible speeches made about my work at NBOA—from staff members to board members to long-time colleagues to my daughter to my oldest friends (some of these categories overlap). Board President Katie Lindsey presented me with the First Annual [Sarah Daignault Award](#), which will be presented every year going forward to a person who has shown “outstanding support of independent schools.” Two of my staff members presented me with two fashion items I've wanted for years—a pith helmet (think Welcome to the Jungle) and a fluffy pink N-boa, since many people believe that NBOA's name ends with “boa” (I think we set the pronunciation record straight tonight). I was reminded of hilariously embarrassing moments from my Madeira school days (my membership in the Brazen Hussies club), told that my staff values the fact that I'll answer emails anytime (including, apparently, from a camel in Jordan at 4am), and informed by people I deeply respect that I've made a true difference in peoples' lives. That's a pretty heady thing to be told, but I know the truth—I did it with the help of everyone who believed, and continues to believe, in the mission of NBOA. In other words, everyone reading this email.

Grateful for every single one of you,
Sarah

Day 3: Wednesday, Feb. 24, 2010

TITLE: Sarah's Symposium Blog, Day 3

My New Favorite Accessory

First things first: I am still wearing my bright pink boa. Yes, the “N-boa” my staff gave me at the Annual Dinner has not come off. Why *would* I take it off, when a) it goes with all of my outfits, b) I get to be called “Her Boa-Ness” when I wear it, c) it continues to remind people that NBOA is pronounced en-bee-oh-ay, and d) I get great double-takes in the hallways? If you're headed to NAIS today, look for me (it won't be hard, the thing is radioactive pink); I'll let you try it on.

Paying Attention to Attention

Our morning keynote speaker was acclaimed Boston Globe columnist [Maggie Jackson](#), who spoke to us about finding focus in this age of ever-present distraction. She spoke about the need to “pay attention to attention” as the first step in rekindling the skill of deep focus. She walked us through a brief history of distraction, shared some disturbing statistics (the average American worker switches tasks every three minutes), pointed to provocative new developments on the technology-overtaking-human-interaction front (judges in some states are now allowing “virtual” custody visits), and discussed some success stories of people fighting back to reclaim their ability to think without being interrupted (IBM's Think Friday initiative, which encourages workers to shut down their email and learn about something new). She urged us to recognize what a precious gift “screen-free” attention can be when given to others, noting that it's a piece of

your life, given freely to another person, that cannot be taken back. Powerful. No wonder our registration desk was stampeded by people clamoring to buy her book [Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age](#). Check out her [blog](#) for more great insights.

Wisdom ‘Round Every Corner

After a quick caffeine refuel, four hundred business officers in their light-blue NBOA lanyards (and I in my boa) headed off to morning concurrent sessions, where we learned about everything from facilitating a facilities turnaround to effectively negotiating the head’s contract. Flitting about between sessions, I happened upon David Zach, yesterday’s keynote, in the hallway, and had a terrific conversation following up on Jackson’s talk. We covered Margaret Mead’s enduring and conflicted legacy, the three Ts needed for every company (“talent, tolerance, and technology, but they forgot the 4th—tradition”), and the new movement baby boomers are undertaking to “reboot” (check out www.ournextthing.com). This is what I love about Symposium—there’s someone around every corner with something to teach you.

Welcoming “The New Guy”

Katie Lindsey kicked off lunch with a great “State of NBOA” speech, sharing statistics on our incredible growth (from 23 members to north of 810! from 2 staff members to a dozen spread across the country!). She also led a moment of silence for Joe Guccione, an esteemed and beloved member of our community who passed away this past year. She reminded us of the incredible gift that being in each other’s presence provides, and pointed to NBOA’s bright future—headed by a very exciting individual: our next Executive Director, Jeff Shields. Now, I love Jeff Shields for many reasons—he’s smart, he’s funny, and he *gets* NBOA—but I *really* love that *other* people now get to love Jeff Shields, too. Countless business officers, upon meeting him for the first time, cornered me afterward and said, “That guy’s terrific.” Jeff, who I insist on calling “The New Guy,” gave a brief speech to our lunch crowd in which he said that a common theme has emerged in his conversations with conference participants: “Sarah’s shoes—filling them, competing with them, buying them.” He assured us that while he has deep respect for my shoes, he will be walking in his own. Love that!

Everyone’s at the Table

In the afternoon, I led a 3-hour session on Financial Sustainability for school teams—two or more senior administrators from the same school (business officer + trustee, admission officer, head of school, etc.). Yes, I had my boa up on stage. The session was terrific—it was extraordinary to see heads and business officers working together with their partners to solve problems. After leading everyone through a powerpoint on the state of our schools (I’ll be posting my scary graph about how school tuition has been tracking radically above CPI for years), we worked on a case study of a school in trouble on both the admission and the endowment fronts. Having everyone at the same table was pretty interesting—when one person said, “the answer is to fire the admission director,” real-live admission officers in the room were able to answer back. It felt like a little bit of IBM Think Friday in the Fairmont Hotel.

Saying Goodbye

While my own Think Friday was wrapping up in the Gold Room, I saw business officers streaming into the hallways from the Fountain, Crystal, and Pavilion rooms (after a pitstop at the Cirque room for a circus-themed snack break complete with popcorn and bags of peanuts). People were busy! Some were cost-cutting and reducing liability in lean times, some were learning to protect themselves from the next generation of school risk, others were putting a for-

profit mindset to work in the business office, and still others were busting “e-myths” and taming technology. It was sad to see people wheeling their suitcases to the hotel desks and bidding farewell to one another in the majestic lobby. I take comfort in the fact that this experience renewed personal connections that will last until we get to be together again (mark your calendars now: Feb. 21-23 at the Capital Hilton, two blocks from the White House). It’s also great to know that the highlights from the incredible wealth of knowledge shared at this conference will be available to all members when our Symposium presentations are posted online in the coming weeks—we’ll let you know when they’re up. And now, folks, it’s time for me to shut down my computer, zip up my suitcase, take my boa, and hit the road.

Miss you already,
Sarah