

# Mentor to Remember

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*by Margaret Skurka, MS, RHIA, CCS*

The old Army recruiting slogan "Be all that you can be" comes to mind this month as I challenge you to serve as an effective mentor or professional role model for a new HIM professional. With the untimely death of my mentor and program director Rita Finnegan, RHIA, CCS, this summer, I've been reflecting on the mentoring I received and wishing that all of our new professionals today could have the same experience.

## Trained by the Best

I entered the University of Illinois medical record administration program in 1973 as a fairly clueless-but-eager college student. I learned early the importance of focusing on the project at hand, and I told Rita many times thereafter that she "ran a tight ship."

I didn't just learn about HIM in that program; I learned professionalism, work ethic, and discipline. The work load was intense, the demands significant—and my classmates and I graduated very proud to say we had completed the program directed by Rita Finnegan.

That professionalism, work ethic, and discipline have served me well. My classmates and I, at our yearly reunions, find the discussion inevitably comes around to our program experiences and the kind of role model and work ethic that our program director established for us. We were trained by the best.

There are 40,000 of us now in this Association. If everyone reading this message decided to mentor one new professional in the same way I was mentored, we would, in the future, have many professionals with the same focus, work ethic, and sense of professionalism that Rita's students were shown.

What a volunteer structure we'd have if everyone embraced the volunteer role and taught the volunteer responsibilities the way Rita did. It clearly wasn't a choice to volunteer for the profession and the Association, it was an obligation and an expectation—one that paid off throughout my career.

## Meet the Young Professionals

This summer I met with some of the new professionals assembled at AHIMA's Chicago office to discuss current issues in the field. With that group, I reflected on my early experiences with AHIMA (then AMRA). During my first year out of school, Rita, then national president, asked me to be a member of the Tellers Committee—counting the votes for the ballot. It was my first trip to the AHIMA office and the beginning of a long volunteer record.

If you've heard me give an AHIMA state update in the past few years, you've probably heard me say something about volunteering. I've been pretty involved throughout my career, but I've taken away from my volunteer experiences far more than I've given. It has been and is a very wonderful experience.

If our new professionals today see those of us who have been in the field continuing to volunteer and speaking positively of the experience, it will inspire their enthusiasm, too. I loved hearing what our new professionals had to say in 2000—and I know that former leaders like Rita were listening to what many of us were saying in the 1970s.

I encourage state leaders to establish a young professionals network within your state. Perhaps they will be a community of practice within your state, meeting online and in person at state meetings, sharing ideas with the state leadership and educators.

Our new professionals today see a very different field from the one I (and maybe you) entered. As healthcare economist and Princeton professor Uwe Reinhardt recently said, "If the motto of the healthcare industry in the 1990s was 'Only the fit survive,' then the motto for this first decade of the new millennium is more likely to be 'He or she with the information rules.'" That is the field today. Our new graduates know it and want to embrace it. Let's help move the profession and the Association forward.

Be a mentor. Be a professional role model. Participate in clinical experience when asked. Volunteer to take students if you've not been asked. You'll learn from them as much as they learn from you. Talk to them about future changes in the profession and Association. Teach them, show them, and welcome them.

## Are We Ready for Changes?

This month, delegates from each state will be voting on key issues critical to the future of the Association. Will we transition to communities of practice? Will we pass a dues increase? Will we reduce the structure in the bylaws to allow future change to happen? Will we voice support for the expeditions currently under way at AHIMA and reported on regularly in *AHIMA Advantage*? Will we transition the Association to the future?

I can remember Rita talking to us about the importance of membership in the Association. It wasn't portrayed as an option—it was a necessity in the work world we were entering. Today, with these changes on the horizon, we hear our members sometimes talk negatively about change and the future.

Are we moving faster than ever before at the board level and making decisions more quickly? Yes, and we have to. Do we know every detail about how the changes will affect us? No, and we can't. We think the changes we're making will make AHIMA more indispensable than ever. It is not an option to belong and be active in the Association. It is a necessity. You need the information the Association provides every day.

Thanks, Rita, for encouraging me and so many others to "be all that we can be." It's been a great journey.

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