Sleeping on a Mechanical Bull: My Journey to the May Meeting of the NCBE Board of Trustees

by Hon. Thomas J. Bice

The NCBE Board of Trustees meeting had been scheduled for months to be held in mid-May in Monterey, California. As Chair of the Board, I was excited and energized by the prospects of the upcoming meeting.

But as life sometimes plays out, about a month earlier I had made the mistake of taking a commercial flight while in the last stages of a sinus infection. The results of that experience were painful and necessitated a visit to the emergency room and consultation with an ear specialist. Two days before my scheduled airline departure for the Board meeting, the doctor in no uncertain terms declared “no flying” and said that I would need some minor surgery to address my condition. My hopes and commitment to fulfilling my duties to NCBE were suddenly being challenged by this unexpected medical situation.

I was not to be denied attending this important meeting where critical issues affecting NCBE were on the agenda. Before I was even out of the parking lot of the doctor’s office, I was on my cell phone calling Laurie Lutz, NCBE’s Meetings Coordinator. Knowing Laurie’s unparalleled expertise in these matters, I explained my dilemma to her and sought her advice. In a reassuring tone, she promised she would get back to me as soon as possible.

I remember trying to sleep the night that followed. My ears were full and ringing and I could hear my own heartbeat as I placed my head on the pillow and sought to find a few moments of rest. I was upset and restless knowing a very real possibility existed that I was about to miss this very important meeting.

In a state of limbo, I arose early the next morning and headed to my office before 6 a.m. As was my custom, I fired up my computer to ascertain what proposed orders and emails had arrived during my overnight absence. I instantly noted an incoming message from NCBE’s trusted travel agent. I had been booked on Amtrak for that evening for travel from Osceola, Iowa, to Emeryville, California. The journey, one way, without taking into account the drive from Emeryville to Monterey, would encompass 44 nonstop hours of train travel across half of the North American continent. Needless to say, I had to adjust my attitude and make some quick changes to accommodate this amended schedule. But I was committed to making this work.

Later that afternoon, I packed and headed out on the 140-mile drive from my home to Osceola, Iowa, to catch the 8 p.m. departure of the “California Zephyr.” I had my computer and “hot spot” loaded and planned to make good use of this time so as to stay up with my work. The “Zephyr” arrived on time, and I was escorted to my roomette and shown the workings of my small but private surroundings. I quickly got myself organized within my space, which had the feel of traveling at 80 miles per hour in a pup tent.
The first night on the train was rough at best. I was totally unfamiliar with my surroundings, and sharing communal bath and restroom facilities was an adjustment. And then there was the matter of trying to sleep. On a “bed” composed of two small fold-down seats drawn together with a thin foam mattress and topped with small airline-type pillows, I tried to rest. But there was something about the rocking and rolling of a train hurtling across western Nebraska at full speed with the horn blasting two longs, a short, and another long at every crossing that made the sleep experience elusive. It truly was like trying to sleep while riding a mechanical bull!

As the sun arose, I took the first opportunity to head to the dining car. There, the Amtrak personnel greeted me and escorted me to my seat. All meals, other than dinner, were on a first come, first served basis. The menu was limited but certainly adequate. And as was the custom, the seating was “family style,” which meant you sat at a full table with total strangers. But this arrangement proved to be one of the true highlights of such a means of travel. At every meal, you would meet and converse with some very interesting people. As I soon discovered, very few businesspeople were aboard the train but rather students, European tourists, tour groups, and retirees fulfilling a “bucket list” desire. The conversations over dinner were exceptionally interesting and broadening. Everyone was relaxed and congenial, and the Amtrak personnel were dedicated, professional, and exceptionally friendly.

During the daylight hours, thanks to my “hot spot” and the Internet, I was able to communicate with my staff, exchange documents, and proceed with the day’s work without missing a beat. And as a side benefit, the window of my roomette looked out on some of the most spectacular scenery in North America: the Rockies and the Sierra Nevada mountains. Given the terrain and the remoteness of our location, there were times when connection to the Internet was impossible. At such moments, I was able to pause and enjoy the beauty of the surroundings, and the passage of time became of less importance.

Upon arrival in Emeryville, California, I was able to secure a rental car and headed to Monterey. I quickly learned about the challenges of driving on a clogged San Francisco freeway at rush hour. My 120-mile trip took 4½ hours, as I was often stopped in traffic. Finally, about 9:30 p.m. on Thursday, after leaving my home at mid-afternoon on Tuesday, I had arrived at the meeting site. As I walked through the doors of the hotel, there sitting in the nearby lounge following dinner were my colleagues from NCBE. For me, it was a “homecoming” that I will never forget.

The meetings were conducted and our NCBE business was transacted per our agenda. The surroundings were magnificent and the opportunity to share ideas with my fellow bar examiners beyond description.

As I drove back to Emeryville from Monterey in the very early morning hours on Sunday to catch my return “Zephyr,” a sense of thankfulness overcame me. With the capable assistance and understanding of the NCBE staff, I had been able to fulfill my duty in attending and presiding over this important meeting. Throughout my 44-hour journey home, the glow and fulfillment of this grand and unexpected experience filled me with appreciation for all that NCBE and its Board of Trustees, staff, and leadership provide to our great profession. Yes, for me, that ride on that mechanical bull certainly was a blessing in disguise, and I offer a heartfelt word of thanks to all who helped make it possible.

Hon. Thomas J. Bice is 2015–2016 Chair of the NCBE Board of Trustees.