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**“A Funny Thing Happened
on the Way to the RIC ”
Commissioner David Wright
(as prepared and not delivered)
March 10, 2021**

Good morning

It’s an honor to appear before you today’s part of this virtual RIC.

I’m coming to you from my home in South Carolina which by itself is a sign of just how different things are from our last RIC in 2019.

And just as this is not a typical RIC my remarks today will not be the typical RIC remarks although I’m sure you may have guessed that already.

That said I doubt you expected to see a Commissioner at his kitchen table, though, huh!

While I will definitely touch on some of the NRC’s work and accomplishments in my remarks today

I’d also like to talk to you about some of my reflections on the last year and share some personal stories as I do so.

I’ve been working from South Carolina for almost a year now which has at times made me feel a bit like an outsider-looking-in at NRC headquarters.

I have missed seeing ya’ll in person my staff, the NRC staff, my Commissioner colleague as well as our licensees, applicants, and international counterparts.

The past year truly put all of us to the test both personally and professionally.

There’s no denying that 2020 and the beginning of 2021 has been difficult certainly far, far away from normal years. For many the word “devastation” would be an understatement in describing the past year.

There has been political and social unrest.

Millions of people around the world contracted the coronavirus and many hundreds of thousands have died from it a heartbreaking result.

EVERY person watching, listening and participating in this RIC Conference has been touched in some way by this pandemic. Some worse than others, but impacted nonetheless.

My heart goes out to those of you who have lost a loved one a friend or have been hurt by the virus in some other way.

If you contracted the virus and are here with us today I give thanks and I am very happy for you.

If you have not contracted the virus count your blessings and continue to do what you have done to stay safe and healthy.

We WILL get through this pandemic as more and more people get vaccinated and can, hopefully, return to a more normal existence sooner, rather than later.

But for now, here we are, living in a mostly virtual world. It's been surreal. It's been exhausting.

It's meant pivots and expected and unexpected challenges.

And, as during any challenging time, I know we all have had to reflect on how to adapt how to achieve our goals despite the challenges we face how to survive AND THRIVE.

During this past year I've found myself coping with all the uncertainty and change by trying to find joy and laughter whenever possible.

To be clear, there is nothing funny about the hardships we have faced or COVID.

But there is a reason for the saying "Laughter is the best medicine."

And, it is true – laughter does make you feel good, doesn't it?

It may not cure all our ills but laughter's proven to help improve our mood AND our overall health.

It reduces stress helps our immune system it relaxes us and it increases our creativity and connections to people.

My remarks today will touch on what I view as the transformative power of laughter and how it's helped get me through some very challenging times.

During this past year I've also reflected about what we've gained from the adversity we've faced.

This pandemic has forced all of us both the NRC staff and all of our domestic and international partners who are here today to adapt to change to think creatively about how to get our work done and how to balance that work with our changed personal lives.

Circumstances have forced all of us to transform how we work and how we live. We've had to embrace and take well-calculated risks to continue living our lives ADOPT technology to continue to do school work our jobs to socialize AND it has transformed the NRC and broken down barriers and silos at the agency.

My remarks today will touch on the NRC's transformation journey and my own as a Commissioner.

And what I can tell you is that I am excited at what I've seen accomplished AND what is on the horizon.

The NRC has demonstrated its ability to transform in key areas – people, risk, technology, and innovation.

This virtual RIC is a great example of that.

Thank you to the NRC staff contractors and participants who've made this possible.

We have an amazing, talented, and resilient group of people at the agency. I didn't imagine a virtual RIC as a possibility when I joined the Commission almost three years ago. To be here today shows how far we've come in a short time.

So, with that, let's get started with a story related to my own journey here today!

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE RIC

You might be wondering about the title for my remarks

As I prepared for today I realized there seems to be a bit of a pattern emerging when it comes to my journey to each RIC.

I know you all like data, trends, analysis, and assessments so maybe you'll appreciate this

I think there is a trend developing as funny things keep happening to me on the way to each year's RIC.

Let me explain.

My first RIC was in 2019. The funny thing there is that I had no idea what to say or do! Trust me, it's funnier to you than it was to me at the time!

I was a new commissioner nervous and a bit scared and I had no clue how to introduce myself to you much less what issues I needed to talk about before more than 1,000 people.

I decided to lean into what makes me who I am my values my personal story my family my belief in teamwork how I go about making decisions and how ALL of THAT working together led me to be an NRC Commissioner.

My second RIC – one funny and one unusual thing happened. You can certainly guess the unusual one the fact that the RIC had to be canceled because of the global pandemic.

The funny thing, though, happened before it was canceled.

As you all know, the agency didn't cancel last year's RIC until right before it was supposed to be held.

And not surprisingly much work, effort and thought had gone into getting ready for the RIC by many dedicated NRC staff and some external stakeholders scheduled to participate in different panels.

For my part I had already prepared plenary remarks AND was set to chair a panel on the electric grid, as well.

But then the funny thing happened.

In late February I got a call while on a boat in the middle of the Seine in Paris, France while on work travel. Former Commissioner Burns was there, too, as were several attorneys from OGC.

I could barely hear what my Administrative Assistant was saying on the phone but I was pretty sure she said the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, or EPW, was trying to reach me about my confirmation hearing.

On the boat with the cold wind howling I called the Senate EPW back and was told I better clear my calendar for – you guessed it – March 11th the very same day and time I was scheduled to do my plenary remarks and chair the grid panel!

So before last year's RIC got canceled my plenary remarks and grid session were canceled. But it was an easy decision as I was confirmed for another term and was honored to be joined at the hearing by a wonderful colleague and now Chairman of our agency Chris Hanson.

I'm also very grateful to be able to do that canceled grid session at this year's RIC and want to give a special shout out to Candace de Messier for her help both last year AND this year!

So what was the funny thing that happened on the way to this year's RIC?

Well, when I left Rockville last March directly after my confirmation and celebrating with my staff (here we are at Pinstripes) I thought I was only going home for a weekend.

The joke as you can imagine was most definitely on me!

Talk about a transformed journey!

I literally only packed two changes of clothes and my toiletries and then the world shut down!

And it would be months before I returned to Maryland from South Carolina.

I look back now and just laugh because what else can you do?

LAUGHTER IS THE BEST MEDICINE

Really, sometimes all you can do is shake your head and laugh and look for the silver lining or anything positive and just keep moving forward because life and living calls for that.

I have reflected quite a bit during this past year about what is important to me and what I have found is that for me laughter has truly been the best medicine in this unbelievably challenging time.

Laughter is something that has always been important to me because of a very important person to me my Dad.

If you heard my 2019 RIC remarks you may recall that my Dad was a life-long Radio and TV broadcaster and personality who went from a radio announcer at age fourteen to owning his own 100,000-watt radio station while on the side working as a PGA Tour radio golf reporter for 50 years and traveling as a stand-up comic appearing at various venues across the country.

Dad really loved to laugh and he loved to make others laugh even more.

And the lesson I learned from him and leaned on this past year is that laughter helps move us forward.

It's not always easy but being able to laugh especially in the face of adversity is necessary in order to be happy and to re-discover happiness.

LAUGHTER RELEASES ENDOPHINS

So how can laughter help you get through things?

Well it releases endorphins which is good because you NEVER know what to expect each day especially in this COVID time!

For example this summer while I was having a virtual periodic with John Lubinski, our NMSS Director I got a call from my 90-year-old mother.

Ya'll may remember my Mom she held the Bible for me when former Chairman Svinicki first swore me in in 2018. She is also currently my neighbor as she lives down the street from me in South Carolina.

Anyway, Mom called with an emergency

She said she heard something in her house that was scaring her and wanted me to come over and find out who or what it was.

Obviously in normal times I would not have been able to help her as I would have been at Headquarters in Maryland. But like many of you who are now juggling personal and professional responsibilities I got off the phone with John and hustled over to her house where she met me outside.

I picked up a broom in the garage why a broom, I don't know but that's what I grabbed and I went inside her house.

Activate the endorphins here because as I went in

I immediately heard something or someone moving around.

And as soon as I opened the door and entered her living room I came face-to-face with an intruder a very scared and angry squirrel.

And it was "game on"!

David versus Rocky, the Angry Squirrel!

I believe he was actually THE Rocky the Squirrel, too, because that sucker had to be flying he was moving so fast.

And, all I had was a broom when what I really needed was a net a really BIG net!

It took days to repair the entry holes to the home – both inside and out – and to finally catch Rocky and his accomplices three of them but it got done. And the intruders were relocated to a habitat far, far away.

Although there was damage done to her house a lot of damage and none of the experience was fun or enjoyable for me Mom and I did have a pretty good laugh about it afterwards. Plus, it definitely created a memory of a lifetime for us to share.

So find things to laugh about even the unexpected or inconvenient.

LAUGHTER IMPROVES JOB PERFORMANCE

Yep! That's right everyone. Laughter enhances job satisfaction and job performance especially for those who work in creative fields or rely on their critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Now for those of you wondering chasing Rocky did not improve my job performance during my periodic with John sorry, John!

But it did increase my engagement and productivity later that day as I worked on several votes.

And it has been proven to do so as well as increase creativity collaboration and well-being while relieving stress and boredom.

Laughter also brings people together which cultivates a positive work environment and culture.

(BUTLER's ORCHARD PIC)

And laughing with others can naturally foster connections, too as well as strengthen existing relationships.

So I encourage each of us here at the NRC and the RIC to find ways to make our work fun and more enjoyable and to have fun with those we work with, too because smiling happiness and laughter are transformative.

TRANSFORMING THROUGH ADVERSITY

And, it's not only laughter that transforms facing ADVERSITY also brings about growth and change.

And from my perspective the adversity we've faced this past year has made the NRC transform and grow stronger.

As I mentioned our transformation efforts have been focused on the themes of people risk technology and innovation.

PEOPLE

I am grateful in particular for the focus on our people as the NRC's people are truly our greatest asset.

The way each of you has shifted to a largely virtual work environment is nothing short of inspiring.

You've gotten the work done while handling so much in your personal lives.

COVID has meant that we've had to change the way we get things done.

We are having to work mainly from home.

That by itself has changed the dynamic because we are at home and not able to interact with our friends our family our coworkers or our counterparts in the same way.

That can create pressure new pressures that we have to deal with. But that does not mean you are alone in your work world NOR do you have to be alone because we are all having the same dynamics in our daily world, too.

All of us have done a great job of making adjustments. We've adapted to everything thrown at us during 2020 and now 2021 AS GOOD or better than many other agencies.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank the NRC's Employee Assistance Program the NRC's staying connected team SBCR and the advisory committees and the EDO.

These individuals and groups put together podcasts, messages, polls, contests, employee programs, talks, and ideas on how to beat the winter blues how to deal with challenges of working from home and provided tips for improving work-life balance.

This has been a wonderful and uplifting part of the NRC's culture this year.

I can tell you getting to judge the Ugly Sweater Contest improved my well-being!

Yes we are a safety regulator.

And, yes, that is what we remain laser-focused on day in and day out. But we do need to stay connected for our physical and mental well-being.

I urge you to share your experiences with others especially those you are in contact with each day.

My challenge to you as a person look for opportunities to laugh and to be happy.

And to smile!

It's actually easier to smile than to frown.

And as discussed smiling and laughing can improve you in many, many ways including becoming a more productive worker.

RISK

In addition to its focus on people, this last year has seen the NRC place an increased emphasis on the consideration of risk as COVID forced us to look more closely at and adapt how we regulate.

I am truly amazed at the varied ways the staff has used creative thinking and risk insights to ensure that the limitations put on us during this pandemic did not affect our regulatory mission.

And I appreciate the input and insights we've received in this area from our licensees, applicants, and international counterparts.

As you know the NRC staff worked to balance the benefit of inspections against the risk of COVID exposure.

Taking these risks into account we have used dashboards to track trends and make decisions on the number of inspection staff on site AND reduced the duration of in-person inspections by conducting remote entrance and exit meetings using resident inspectors for certain onsite portions of inspections and taking advantage of technology.

We've evaluated the risk of certain licensing actions and leveraged past experience, data, and technology to streamline licensing reviews to address challenges licensees and applicants have faced.

We have faced some criticism about our acceptance of risk in these areas and not all of our decisions have been popular. It's understandable because we have changed HOW we do things and change from the norm is hard. But from my perspective we haven't changed WHAT we do – and that's meeting our safety mission.

In fact, I'm inspired by what I see a group of dedicated individuals meeting our important safety mission by engaging with and considering each other and counterparts and leveraging experience to accept reasonable risks.

On a personal note the staff's engagement has made me reflect on my Dad and how he lived his life.

My Dad died on MLK Day 2013 which was also President Obama's Inaugural for his second term.

It was a very hard day as well as a hard week because his funeral would happen a few days later on the following Friday morning.

I had to write his obituary and his eulogy so I spent hours alone his chair in his home office scouring through everything I could looking for things that spoke to what he had done and accomplished over his life on this earth.

I was very sad at first depressed is more like it but by the time Friday rolled around I had found a new appreciation for the life that Dad lived and about the confidence and strength he had given me.

There's no doubt my Dad lived a full life!

Not all of it was pleasant or great for sure but Dad was willing to take the risks necessary in order to be happy with himself every day and that's what I remember most about him today.

The motto of the State of South Carolina is:

"Dum spiro spero" - "While I breathe, I hope".

My goal is to leave that SAME legacy of positive memories for my family and friends and co-workers as my Dad left me.

I encourage you to strive to do the same in your life.

Martin Luther King certainly understood life and what living was all about. When he was 38 years old, he gave a speech that spoke to this belief.

He said and I quote:

"You may be 38 years old, as I happen to be.

And one day, some great opportunity stands before you and calls you to stand up for some great principle some great issue some great cause.

And you refuse to do it because you're afraid You refuse to do it because you want to live longer You're afraid that you'll lose your job or you're afraid that you'll be criticized or that you'll lose your popularity or you're afraid that somebody will stab you or shoot AT you or bomb your house so you refuse to take the stand.

Well, you may go on and live until you're 90 but you're just as dead at 38 as you would be at 90.

And the cessation of breathing in your life is but the belated announcement of an earlier death of the spirit.”

Dr. King's words speak volumes and the challenge is a good one. We are each alive and we're each breathing but not everyone is truly living!

Truly living requires some action on your part, too - the ability to engage that action.

We'll believe it or not that ability to act is already within you. You just HAVE to engage it.

TECHNOLOGY

I see and appreciate the engagement of technology here at the NRC. We have embraced technology to work smarter and more creatively in so many areas including using data analytics to highlight areas for regulatory attention and improvement.

The staff rolled out IdeaScale a technology platform that allows internal collaboration and/on crowd sourcing challenges.

We've implemented an initiative to make the processing of Agreement State license requests for “re-ci-procity” completely paperless.

Region III's Materials Licensing Branch transitioned to a fully digital licensing process using digital signatures and novel encryption technology.

We also moved to a completely paperless National Source Tracking System annual reconciliation.

While technology has allowed us to not only continue to do our important work but improve how we do our work I want to take a moment to highlight how important stepping away from technology can be, as well.

It's so easy to get tied to your computer and to your phone these days but I encourage you all to remember the benefits of stepping away from it.

Not only does it help with focus and engagement it also provides a much-needed mental break.

And you never know what you might see

Over the past year, I've taken to getting outside and going for walks some of them pretty long.

I don't wear earbuds, or anything like that because I like to experience what is around me the people the birds the rabbit the deer and the sounds

I use this time to focus on the positive.

And, what's more positive than a rainbow?

Well, that would be a double rainbow!

During the past year, I have seen more rainbows than I can count. My staff calls me the 'rainbow whisperer' now, because I have seen and photographed so many this year.

If this year has taught us anything it's that we can't take our lives for granted.

We're lucky to be a part of this great world we live in so I encourage you to make the time you have memorable. Appreciate the world around you and find and do the things that make you happy that make you smile and make you laugh.

INNOVATION

One of the things that is truly remarkable is thinking about all the UNEXPECTED ways COVID has forced us to be innovative.

We've all had to find innovative ways to celebrate milestones both positive and negative.

We've had to say goodbye to treasured colleagues like Ho Nieh and former Chairman Kristine Svinicki either over the phone or on a virtual meeting.

We've also welcomed new colleagues like Chairman Hanson and his team in an almost COMPLETELY virtual environment.

We've heard good news!

I'm expecting another grandbaby a grandson this spring. It's not dual units this time just a single unit! He's a Rainbow baby, too which just adds to my happiness.

And we've had to deal with horrible news, as well.

We've had to do ALL OF THIS in a VERY different way because of our circumstances.

There were fewer or no hugs of congratulations or comfort no flying or driving on a whim for work or for personal travel.

At times, it seemed like something new and different was happening to us SEVERAL times a day!

For example literally overnight I, like many of you got introduced to virtual school.

That same March 13th weekend that I went home my youngest son, Andrew who was in his final semester at Anderson University, came home for Spring Break.

Like many other college kids he never went back.

Before the weekend was over, Anderson University went virtual for the rest of the semester so my son took over my home office to finish out his senior year take his final exams AND graduate while I took over the kitchen table to do my work.

Talk about an adjustment for both of us!

I'm still not over not being able to print anything by the way Man, do I miss my printer!

And I know that both Andrew and I had it easy compared to many of you as my son did not need my help with virtual school.

Some of ya'll including many members of my staff turned into home-schoolers, babysitters, and full-time parental or elder-caregivers overnight

on top of already being moms and dads, wives and husbands, and dedicated, hard-working NRC employees. I'm impressed by ALL OF YOU that are managing this while never losing focus OF our important work and mission.

Handling all of these competing responsibilities at once takes creativity and innovation and it's not easy.

I also like many of you learned a bit about quarantine baking.

I went from cooking for myself to trying to cook for me and Andrew and I quickly learned he has different ideas of cooking than mine.

On that first Saturday morning, I asked him if I could cook him some breakfast?

He said, "Yes".

I asked him how he liked his eggs?

And, he answered, "In a cake".

Okay I guess if he really wanted to be on point, he would have asked me to make him some pancakes, muffins or banana bread

BUT he was certainly on point by joining the ranks of many who are now planning a wedding one that will most likely be impacted by COVID restrictions he and his fiancée will be married on June 26th after becoming engaged this past August.

At some point, all you can do is laugh about everything that is happening, though and move forward because we are not always able to change what is happening around us.

The good news especially for those of us quarantine bakers is that laughing can burn as many calories-per-hour as walking!

I wouldn't mind laughing off a few quarantine pounds myself!

I'd like to close with an important lesson one that I had already learned but that remained true during the past year of this pandemic. It's the importance of having and showing Gratitude. This connects to each aspect of the NRC's Transformation journey.

Many of you know that I am a cancer survivor stage three colon cancer.

Here's a not-so-funny thing that happened last year I was told last year that I had prostate cancer only to be told seven weeks later as I was preparing for a radical surgery that I did not have cancer. Instead although it had mimicked cancer and had fooled many docs it was not and it was treatable.

S-o-o-o having been where I've been and traveled the path I've had to travel over the last decade or more well it just makes BEING ALIVE much more meaningful!

Colon Cancer taught me a great deal and I use it every day.

When bad things happen, I look to make something good come from it.

You're going to have bad things happen to you in your life and sometimes those events are bigger than you are or what you think you can handle. Those events may even bring you to a crossroads in your life.

Your choices after taking risk and all other options into account can make all the difference!

Knowing when to ask for help is important, too.

WE ALL NEED HELP AT SOME POINT

Another thing I learned through my cancer is that I was not bullet-proof and that I needed the help of people.

I needed the help of doctors, nurses, family and friends who could provide me the medical help and emotional support I needed.

And, I needed to find and talk about my cancer with others especially those who had had similar experiences through a support group or organization.

I encourage you when you run into problems that are bigger than you and you will don't panic!

Take a deep breath and think of ways to innovate to come up with actions that will help you find peace and comfort and restore happiness to your daily routine.

Find accountability partners support groups organizations and prayer partners that you can rely on to help and support you.

Lean on friends and family whenever possible and when YOU can BE THAT SUPPORT for others in need, as well.

And use technology to connect to others but make sure that you maintain the right balance.

Take some time for yourself time to decompress watch a funny movie or get out and be in nature and experience what's happening around you.

Step away from the computer and the phone.

Find what makes you happy at work and at home and do more of it!

Let this Southern guy give you a suggestion that can make a difference

When you are out doing anything from walking to running to grocery shopping one simple thing you can do that can impact another person's day and life is to just smile and say "hello" even with a mask on, you can see the smile in someone's eyes!

Believe it, or not that simple recognition MAY be the best thing that will happen to THAT person all day long so please don't miss an opportunity to create happiness.

You can change people's lives as well as your own by just being happy in what you do, too and that includes laughing out loud and having fun in what you are doing.

Through laughter and other positive actions you can take I have no doubt that as a result and in return your life will get better, too.

So, smile more!

It's much easier than frowning!

Finally, a simple and easy thing you can do is to simply do MORE of what makes you laugh!

Maybe you like watching funny movies playing with a pet or having a conversation with a friend. Whatever those things ARE that make you happy that make you smile and make you laugh I urge you to re-discover them and do them often.

Thank you for the work that you do and how you've gotten it done during the last year.

My NRC family is a remarkable bunch and I am proud to have an opportunity to work with you.

More importantly, I can't wait to be around you again soon! Until then I am honored to do the NRC's important work from here in South Carolina.

And I will continue to look for rainbows bake cakes for my son chase squirrels for Mom laugh to honor my Dad and try to follow MLK Jr.'s example to live a life well lived.

Thank you very much for listening today.