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## Coronavirus Cannot Mask the Value of ReFocus

By Ronald Klein

While there were no reported cases of coronavirus in Las Vegas at the time of ReFocus 2020, the organizers were prepared. Hand sanitizer lined the hallways, fist bumps replaced handshakes and the latest cases and fatalities were reported by the event moderator, Nina Easton. However, most of the attendees were not concerned. There were no masks, and handshakes, hugs and even kisses were widely seen.

Two companies pulled their employees from the conference at the last minute, and registrants from South Korea, Hong Kong and Japan decided not to travel. Even with these no-shows, the ReFocus Conference broke last year's record with 823 attendees. By all accounts, ReFocus continues to be the not-to-be-missed life insurance and reinsurance industry networking conference of the year.

While many come to network, the sessions did not disappoint the 300 or so people who attended each session, on average. The highlight of the conference was the opening session where Donna Brazile, former chairwoman of the Democratic National Committee and Karl Rove, former deputy chief of staff to George W. Bush, gave the current state of affairs of U.S. politics on the eve of Super Tuesday. The politically opposed pair even predicted that Biden would emerge the victor and it would soon become a two-horse race for the Democratic presidential nominee.

However, the story that Donna Brazile told about how, on a flight to Africa, she had to share her malaria medication with Karl Rove as he forgot to bring his pills, brought down the house. Brazile quipped that Rove was not opposed to "free" medical care on that flight. The session was enhanced by the probing questions posed by Nina Easton. She knows both of the keynote speakers well and the familiarity shined through. Rove and Brazile were introduced by Pete Shaefer, CEO of Hannover Life Re US and platinum sponsor of the conference.



The most anticipated session was a keynote address by Dr. Gaudenz Silberschmidt, director at the World Health Organization. The topic of his presentation was supposed to be how prevention is cheaper than the cure. While he remained on theme for some of his presentation, highlighting how the WHO and the insurance industry have to work together toward a common goal of preventing disease, Dr. Silberschmidt had to spend much of his time on the COVID-19 virus. It was a rare Tuesday morning full house at this session.

The title of this article could have been dramatically different as Dr. Silberschmidt was feeling flu-like symptoms soon after his address and feared that he contracted the coronavirus during his previous visit to Seattle days before. He went into self-quarantine mode, like a good WHO employee, and headed to the hospital for a test. While he tested positive for some virus, it was not COVID-19. In my old neighborhood, we call that a cold. Just imagine the headlines, "WHO Executive Infects the Life Insurance Industry in Las Vegas."

The American Council of Life Insurers and Society of Actuaries, co-hosts of the conference, decided that a dedicated conference room with small meeting tables would enrich the networking

experience. And, given the exit polls, they were spot on. This room was packed with the next round of soon-to-be-announced reinsurance transactions being negotiated. The Bermuda International Long-Term Insurers and Reinsurers (BILTIR) and the Bermuda Business Development Agency (BDA) made sure that the networkers were well caffeinated, as these organizations sponsored a lounge in the dedicated meeting room as platinum sponsors.

Other highlights included the annuity transaction session—where Chip Gillis, former CEO of Athene Life Re moderated a panel of industry powerhouses consisting of Chris Swift, CEO of The Hartford; Rod Martin, CEO of Voya; and Pat Lusk, CEO of Venerable—and inspiring keynote addresses by Susan Neely, CEO of the ACLI; and Greg Heidrich, executive director of the SOA. In addition, the session on genetic testing was extremely well received. Genetic and genomic testing is the future of our industry, and this session highlighted the regulatory and data concerns that currently exist.

We would not be able to have such a successful meeting without the generosity of all of our sponsors. Of course, a special thank-you goes to our diamond sponsor—Milliman. Not only does Milliman host a number of meals and events, but it supports the conference in other ways. Milliman sends many of its actuarial consultants to ReFocus and always volunteers to moderate a panel. The planning committee hopes that Milliman will continue to sponsor at the diamond level and encourage other organizations to move up to higher levels.

Finally, it is my absolute pleasure to serve as co-chair of the ReFocus planning committee with John Laughlin. During the past few years, John and I have grown to become more than col-

leagues. The committee is rounded out by Dawn Trautman and Pete Schaefer. A special thanks goes out to Elizabeth Carden, Tatiana Tolentino and Geneva Barber of the ACLI and Jay Semla of the SOA. The seven of us enjoy working with each other and are not afraid to fight for making the conference even more successful each year. Elizabeth has the short-term goal of reaching 1,000 registrants—why not at ReFocus 2021? The team will take a 30-day, well-deserved break from ReFocus, before beginning our planning for 2021 in early April. We already have three of the session topics drafted for next year.

If your organization would like to reach a large number of life insurance executives with branding and a message, what better place to do so than at ReFocus 2021? Please contact any one of the planning committee members for a personalized sponsoring package. Yes, insurers can be quite creative.

Please visit the ReFocus website ([www.refocusconference.com](http://www.refocusconference.com)) to see the agenda, download the presentations and see who you missed networking with on the attendee list. If you are a frequent ReFocus attendee, we hope to see you back again at the Cosmopolitan Hotel from March 7–9. If you have never attended, please consider this conference in your 2021 travel plans. I guarantee that you will become an annual attendee. ■



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