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ReFocus 2019: “Exponential” Growth for the Best U.S. Life Insurance Networking Conference

By Ronnie Klein

One of my pet peeves is the incorrect use of the term “exponential.” This was exasperated by the term being misused in a recent Swiss science competition that my younger daughter participated in. One of the participants was presenting his project in the finals of the competition about using a magnifying glass to burn different types of paper. He said that the time it took for the paper to catch fire increased “exponentially” as the paper became darker. He then proceeded to show the burn-rate formula which was a quadratic formula. When pressed by one of the seven judges, he explained that the exponential factor was in the constant?!?! Not a few days after the competition, there was an opinion piece in the *New York Times*,¹ on this exact topic.

With this in mind, I will be careful not to say that attendance, networking and quality of the ReFocus Conference has been expanding exponentially. Since inception in 2007, attendance has grown steadily at a rate of 10 percent per year, on average, with increases each year—yes, it is a monotonically increasing function! 2019 did not disappoint with many new records: overall attendance reached more than 780 people, 18 countries were represented and 17 presenters had the title of president or CEO.

While there were so many great presentations, the highlight of the conference had to be Tuesday morning when our keynote speaker took the stage. The ReFocus Programming Committee works hard to make certain that we have great a great keynote speaker. Let’s face it, a big name puts fannies in the seats. So, when we finally signed the contract with Carly Fiorina, we were all thrilled. How can you have a bigger name than the ex-CEO of Hewlett Packard and a Republican Party presidential primary participant?



From left: Elizabeth Carden, ACLI; Ronnie Klein, ReFocus Co-Chair; Keynote Speaker Carly Fiorina; Dawn Trautman, ReFocus Planning Committee; John Laughlin, ReFocus Co-Chair

Missing from photo: Pete Schaefer, ReFocus Planning Committee; Jay Semla, SOA

But it was the content of Carly’s presentation that wowed the lucky audience. The topic of her talk was leadership. Carly gave real-life examples of her journey from graduating Stamford, to dropping out of law school, to her first job as a “Kelly Girl” to her position as a secretary at AT&T to the CEO of one of the most well-known tech companies. And, as good as the presentation was, her candid answers to questions about the #MeToo movement, leaving HP, her experiences in the presidential primaries and her feelings about our current politicians were refreshing.

Carly expounded on her definition of leadership, saying that leaders are not necessarily the ones with the big offices, the big titles and the big salaries. When asked who in U.S. Congress is a true leader, Carly could not come up with one single name. She continued that the legal profession is the biggest feeder-pool into the political profession and that law is a “win-lose” profession. This is taught in law schools and law firms. “Do anything to win.” Politics, in Carly’s opinion, should not be about “win-lose” but about “win-win,” however “win-win” requires thoughtful compromises. In her opinion, the current political landscape is about winning and fundraising. There is no emphasis on problem solving. Her presentation was nothing short of inspiring and her views on politics were eye-opening. While I

was seated in the first row, colleagues of mine in the back of the room said that you could hear a pin drop.

Another highlight for me was our new conference emcee, Nina Easton. The Programming Committee made a tough choice to part ways with long-time moderator Bill Press for a “fresh face.” Whoever took this role had very large shoes to fill as Bill grew into a ReFocus family member. Whatever doubts that we had were quickly allayed when Nina took the stage for the first time. Her work ethic preparing for the conference really paid off and was especially evident during the two sessions that she moderated. Nina has a natural curiosity that helped her get to the heart of the discussion, sometimes a bit off script. While we have not yet signed a contract for next year, I fully expect that we will be asking Nina back for ReFocus 2020 at the Bellagio Hotel from March 1–4.



I not only would like Nina to be at ReFocus 2020, but I would like to see you as well. The American Conference of Life Insurers (ACLI) and Society of Actuaries (SOA), along with the Programming Committee, work very hard to get all of your clients, business contacts and colleagues in one place at one time. Think of the money that your company would save to send you to this amazing conference. The content is fabulous and the networking opportunities are even better. I would like to personally thank my co-chair, John Laughlin, for his hard work and dedication to the ReFocus Conference. More importantly, I would like to thank John for his friendship. The committee would not be complete without Dawn Trautman and Pete Schaefer. Finally, Team SOA, led by Jay Semla and Team ACLI led by Elizabeth Carden, provide content and logistic support as well as a keen attention to detail. Overall, it is a team that I am proud to be part of.

If you would like to know more about ReFocus, please contact Jay, Elizabeth, Dawn, Pete, John or me. And, if you would like the ability to get company recognition from 800 life insurance executives, please contact any of us about sponsorship opportunities. We can always use another Diamond Sponsor, so let us know if you would like to upgrade your sponsorship as well. See you in Vegas next year! ■



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ENDNOTE

- 1 Suri, Manil. (2019) “Stop Saying ‘ Exponential.’ Sincerely, a Math Nerd.” *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/04/opinion/exponential-language-math.html>.