

Conor McNulty Made a Deep Impression During a Short Tenure

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Conor McNulty, CAE, could not have started his career as Executive Director of the Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) at a more challenging time. Conor's first day at the MDS was Monday, March 9, 2020—just as the United States began facing the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the end of that week, he had moved to close the MDS offices, directing staff to work remotely to slow the spread and protect MDS staff, our families, and the public from the virus. This was 10 days before Governor Charlie Baker would order all non-essential businesses in the state to cease in-person operations and the Department of Public Health would issue its stay-at-home advisory. Subsequently on March 15, the MDS Board of Trustees issued guidance that all dental practices in the Commonwealth close their offices to elective and non-urgent care. The ADA would follow suit the next day. In his first week on the job, Conor had already positioned the MDS ahead of the curve and showed himself more than capable of shepherding the Society—including 39 staff members, the Board of Trustees, and 5,000-plus members—through the onset of a global pandemic.

That first day in the office, Conor showed up early at 2 Willow Street in a dark suit, with a wide, easy smile, and walked into my office, greeting me with a social-distancing-friendly “elbow bump” and a boisterous “Good morning! How’s it going?”—spoken with an admirable optimism that instilled confidence. Sadly, that was the last time we actually met in person. When the leadership in a company turns over, it’s normal for employees to feel some trepidation at having a new, unknown person taking charge. And while Conor was indeed new, in a sense we were all starting new jobs at the MDS—and not just due to some shifting of roles as a result of coronavirus. With a new Executive Director at the helm, you can’t help but feel like you’re starting from scratch with the need to prove yourself.

But in those first few weeks, with his calming presence and genuine and friendly demeanor, Conor quickly allayed our fears. The entire staff swiftly transitioned to utilizing Microsoft Teams for collaboration and to Zoom virtual meetings, working to determine the information and resources our members needed most to help them navigate the pandemic. For the next three months, we worked closer than ever over long days to understand and communicate the rapidly changing information and guidance on COVID-19. We were all working at warp speed and under a stress level that we’d never before encountered in our professional or personal lives, but at the center, keeping us from spinning out, was Conor: cool, calm, collected.

Obviously, it was strange to have our interactions with the Executive Director conducted only online over a Teams or Zoom call, and it would’ve been easy, at a time of tremendous stress and confusion

as the pandemic worsened both locally and nationally and with staff scattered to makeshift desks in home offices miles and miles apart from each other, to feel isolated and overwhelmed. But Conor made the effort to keep the staff unified and heading in the same direction. He led weekly all-staff Zoom meetings where he and the management team updated us on important information and made us feel like a team. I’m sure it must have been incredibly challenging for him, especially in those earlier days, to be on a Zoom call and see 30-plus faces staring back at him, sometimes with a mix of exhaustion, stress, and anxiety. I remember him joking a couple of times, “Remind me not to play poker with any of you, because those are some serious poker faces.” That sense of humor, along with his disarming knowledge of pop culture and sports references (even going so far as to don a Red Sox hat, making him a true good sport), went a long way to easing our tensions and making us feel connected, not just to him but to one another. He’d gently pull us out of our shells, asking if we had watched “Tiger King,” taking note of open hiking trails (and breweries), or talking about running (he was an avid runner). Conor knew what he was doing, and these seemingly small efforts and gestures made a huge difference in keeping us together and connected during these unprecedented times.

Without a doubt, working at the MDS is more than just a job for us. Like any other office staff—such as a dental practice team—we spend a majority of our waking hours together, and our coworkers become friends and family. In addition to the dozens of calls Conor participated in each day with the management team, the Board, Task Force members, member dentists, the ADA, and colleagues from other state dental societies, he still made it his goal to reach out to staff members one-on-one, via Teams video calls, to see how we were holding up and to get to know us better. He would ask about our families, how we were doing, what Netflix or TV shows we were bingeing. And I think he did that because he knew we needed that.

Conor repeatedly encouraged us to take care of ourselves physically and emotionally during these stressful times, urging us to take a break and walk around the house or get some fresh air if necessary. These were unprecedented times with unprecedented stressors, and he wanted to keep us from burning out or feeling isolated. I remember on a couple of occasions I’d respond to Crisis Communications Team emails late in the evening and he’d reply with an answer or comment and then say, “Now step away from the computer and get some rest!”

Conor’s unabashed enthusiasm and excitement for his MDS role were contagious. He acknowledged our efforts and made us feel proud of what we were doing. He guided us to collaborate across depart-

ments, fostering a true sense of team unity, and resulting in a newfound respect for one another and ourselves. He energized us to expand on our skills and overcome the unprecedented challenges we faced. He helped bring us closer together at a time when we couldn’t be more physically apart.



After months of providing resources and informing all Massachusetts dentists—members and non-members alike—on the guidelines they needed to follow to ready their return to practice, the state launched the two-pronged Phase 2 of its reopening on June 6 and 25, respectively, and this helped the MDS staff start to slow to a more manageable pace. Things were starting to get back to normal. The need to send daily (often multiple times daily) emails began to dial back to two or three a week, and only when we had new or critical information to share. The breakneck pace we’d been working at since March started to ease, and we all looked forward to resuming some normalcy in our work and personal lives. We went into the 4th of July holiday weekend ready for some much-needed relaxation.

On the morning of Tuesday, July 7, we learned that Conor had unexpectedly died the previous day in his Framingham home. Resolutely, the management team set about the difficult task of notifying the Board members and staff of the tragedy. To say that the MDS staff and Board were shaken by this news is an understatement. We are still trying to process our loss. The loss of a decisive, insightful, and confident leader. The loss of a kind and witty colleague and friend we were only just beginning to get to know.

Although the timing of Conor’s start at the MDS was less than ideal, he left us as things may have begun returning to some sense of normalcy. And Conor was instrumental in this. He helped guide us through this unprecedented series of events to a place of stability and hope. Just as his predecessor Dr. Bob Boose had done for nearly 20 years, Conor—in these few months—took the helm and quietly set us, his staff, on a course to continue pursuing new and better ways to do our jobs, to provide value to our members, and to truly collaborate as a team. That last part might just be his true legacy at the MDS . . . a legacy we will honor him for in the days, weeks, months, and years ahead.