Canadian Audiologist

The Official Publication of the Canadian Academy of Audiology

Mike Valente: The Helper

Published July 3rd, 2018

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My first interaction with Mike Valente occurred over the phone. It was October of 1997. I had just moved to Missouri in the late summer to start a new job as director of audiology at St. Louis University Medical Center. On top of knowing absolutely nobody, as a young professional, I had zero experience directing an audiology clinic or managing a staff, let alone a departmental budget. Faced with a pressing issue, I was in need of some quick advice, preferably from someone experienced in directing an audiology clinic at a busy a medical center. With my go-to mentor out of the country and Washington University Medical Center just a stone's throw away from my new

office, out of sheer desperation, I cold-called Dr. Valente. I was completely caught off guard not only when he answered the phone, but how candid he was in offering advice despite not knowing me. I distinctly remember him telling me to feel free to call in the future if I needed help with anything else. After thanking him, he ended the phone call with his standard response of “My pleasure.”.

This brief vignette about a three-minute phone call from 20+ years ago may seem small and insignificant. Quite frankly, I don’t remember the reasons warranting my call in the first place. Nevertheless, to this day, I vividly remember exactly how that conversation made me feel. Mike was genuine in offering advice to a total stranger without reservation. Weeks after our phone conversation, I would occasionally reflect on that interaction and was so grateful for his willingness to help.

Over the course of the next few years, I reached out to Mike more than a handful of times, mainly for advice, although one time in particular I wasn’t really seeking advice. After naïvely interviewing with the local press about preliminary findings of microbial growth on hearing aids, I came into work the next morning to a flurry of e-mails and voice messages from angry Missouri audiologists who were understandably upset about a newspaper article warning consumers of the potential risk of becoming ill if they went to see an audiologist. While the article did not resemble anything close to what was discussed during the interview, my name was plastered throughout the newspaper. I was sick to my stomach. It was difficult to focus on work. The only thing I wanted to do was crawl under my desk and stay there for a month. I instinctively picked up the phone to call “Big Mike” for advice. Once I heard his voice, I soon realized the purpose of the call was to allow me to hear a friendly, supportive voice. Mike said exactly what I needed to hear, offering me a perspective that enabled me to shake the day’s events off and move on.

Over the past two decades, I have experienced the same level of kindness while collaborating on different publication or presentation projects. It never ceases to amaze me how generous Mike is with his time and his knowledge. He spends a lot of his free time writing and/or editing articles, chapters, and books because he wants to share objective results and critical insights with others, all for very little to no remuneration. Mike does not hoard information; rather, he is always thinking about effective ways to make it more accessible for the benefit of the profession. He has clocked a significant amount of volunteer hours to serve on numerous task forces, committees, sub-committees, and working groups. He is a dedicated educator, securing grant funding to offer students research opportunities, mentoring numerous capstone projects, and taking the time out of his busy schedule to teach amplification courses. Mike does all this because he is a generous man.

So, imagine there’s no research. Even if you ignore Dr. Valente’s impressive research contributions and simply focus on the kind of person he is, it remains perfectly clear that Mike is a thoughtful, generous, kind man. Having him as a colleague and, more importantly, as a friend has been “my pleasure.”