

REFLECTING ON THE ROAD TO DENVER

An Interview with Conference Co-Chairs
Richard Pittenridge, SR/WA, R/W-NAC,
and Jon Vaughan, SR/WA, MAI



I'm in a unique position this year, having served as co-chair of the Denver 2023 conference from the time of our application in 2019 before I ran for International Secretary, right up until Jon Vaughan, SR/WA, bailed me out and took over in late April earlier this year so I could concentrate on my duties as incoming International President. I recently had the pleasure of sitting down with Jon and his conference co-chair Richard Pittenridge, SR/WA, to reflect on the recent accomplishment of having completed the 69th International Annual Education Conference.

BY FRED EASTON, JR., PLS, SR/WA, R/W-AMC

**Congratulations on a highly successful conference!
How do you feel now that it is over?**

Jon: It was a great time — I had a whole lot of fun. There was a bit of chaos right at the end, but it all went off as planned.

Richard: Relieved, happy, successful — I feel like we did a good job. Not everything we wanted to happen did, but I haven't heard anything but positive feedback. Volunteers and staff really stepped up and got it done!

Hey, no one needs to know about all the things we didn't do! I'm a bit envious that you're done. I'll take my victory lap after Long Beach when my year as International President is over. Despite the chaos, you both looked relaxed up there on stage. How did it feel?

Jon: I enjoyed it. It was a whole lot of fun getting to be up there with your friend. I would recommend future co-chairs have an existing relationship and established rapport.

Richard: At first, I was very nervous. Normally in a room of 20 people, I can be a big talker, but being on a stage was a different ball game. Then after getting through the first couple lines, it started to feel more natural. I think the key was the dynamic. Originally with you as the co-chair, it was about being on stage with my best friend, clowning around with me as the goofy guy to your serious personality.

Right, that's why Jon was so perfect to jump in – you already have that same dynamic. I think it's important that the co-chairs' stage presence feel natural. Now that you're done, do you have any tips or tricks?

Richard: I would look for key people in the crowd. Like I would see someone I know, like Steve Grandon, SR/WA, and then just pretend I was only talking to that person.

I used that trick too. At the gala speech, I had to avoid looking at my wife Heather and getting too emotional, but luckily, I could see you and other Chapter 6 friends. Other than some minor issues, everything went smoothly. How was it behind the scenes?

Jon: Volunteers did a great job and stepped up to smooth any problems, we are always blessed with a lot of volunteers from across the entire organization.

Richard: Bumps were smoothed over quickly, there always is last-minute chaos, but things were handled quickly. I agree with Fred, if you needed help, just look for a black-and-orange Colorado shirt volunteer, like Lifetime Achievement Award winner Ernie Franzoy — they were there to help.

It's good to hear that there was always someone around willing to lend a hand. Last year, when I unexpectedly became International President-Elect after the special election, a part of me knew that I might have to resign as conference co-chair due to the immense workload.

Richard: I really thought you might have been able to stay as conference co-chair. I worked hard, and there are only a couple people that work just as hard, and you are one of them. But maybe I was naïve because I've never been co-chair and on the IEC at the same time. You did a great job right up to the point you had to resign.

Jon: I thought it was a lot to do, but I had confidence that if you said you could do it, you could.

I wanted to do the best I could to not let the Chapter down, especially after I had pushed so hard for the conference to be in Denver in the first place. I figured if I could get the planning stage to around 95%, I could probably talk someone into taking over. What was your reaction when I resigned?

Richard: Something I don't want to say in a public interview! But it was basically frustration. This was something we'd agreed to do together. However, you had done a good job preparing a list of pros and cons of why you needed to, and eventually, I did realize this made sense, given how much you had on your plate. I know you didn't want to, and you gave up your moment on stage, but this is what makes you a great International President — you make the hard choices.

Jon: I found out when Richard called and asked if I could step in as co-chair. A part of me thought this made a lot of sense. I was worried about how I was going to be able to cover all the duties a committee member, and suddenly, I was agreeing to take on a bigger role as conference co-chair.



I really appreciate that you stepped up, Jon. You have been on the planning committee from the beginning but with different roles – was it a difficult decision to become co-chair?

Jon: Well, my first response was “no,” so it was a pretty tough decision. But Richard said he’d see if anyone else was interested and get back to me and after taking a bit to think it through, I realized we had a great committee that nearly had us across the finish line, and this is what was best for the Chapter and for you to start your presidency. I’m glad I did it!

Richard: I didn’t really call anyone, just figured if I waited a bit, you’d come around.

I’ve always said you are one of the best negotiators I’ve ever seen, sometimes that means knowing when to back off and wait. And you are right Jon, we had a great support team!

Jon: Thank you to our volunteers, led by Kirsten Muncy, SR/WA, and our employers who supported us throughout this endeavor!

This is the fourth time Denver has hosted a Conference – the only Chapter to ever host four times – why did you think it important for Denver to do this?

Richard: Denver is just such a great place to host a conference. There is so much to do here! And we wanted to beat San Diego to the punch of hosting four times!

Jon: We’re centrally located, which makes it easy for people to fly into and out of. This ended up being a good thing, considering we ended up on the week of the most air travel in the history of mankind.

Yeah, that was a bit shocking, I just read an article that June 30, 2023, set that record. I’m glad that attendees were still able to make it and have a great conference experience. The best thing about the conference for me is seeing the friends that you haven’t seen in a year. Each time, the time apart just fades away, and it feels like seeing your family every holiday. What was your favorite part of this year’s conference?

Jon: Of course, seeing your friends all in one place every year is a huge part of what makes our conferences so memorable. Also, I thought John Register did a phenomenal job at the Opening Ceremony. I’m always so inspired by our keynote speakers.

Richard: The Federal Agency Updates and the Plenary Session. I really enjoyed learning about how water issues are so similar around the globe.



What’s some advice you have for future conference hosts?

Jon: The tasks spreadsheet was the key to crossing the finish line. Also, having a consistent weekly meeting with the entire planning committee was essential.

Richard: Start early, get a good team and have a plan. Have brainstorming sessions and welcome creativity — these conferences don’t always have to be done just the same way as they were done before.

Well said! Any last thoughts on Conference?

Jon: Great conference, everything came together when it needed to. Thanks to HQ staff — I had no idea how hard they work during conference to make sure it all comes together. Finally, if you want to make connections at conference, volunteer for a shift or two at registration and at the bag stuffing!

Richard: I had a great time! I concur with Jon. From the start Vivian, Dyemond and especially Jade from staff were key in making this happen all year long. Also, it was great to have a full breakfast for breakfast and not just a continental!

I completely agree. I appreciate of all the hard work everyone puts into it! Thanks for sitting down and chatting with me about conference. Cheers to next year’s conference in Long Beach – it’s going to be a great one. ★