Dennis Eisnach: A Calm Man in Tough Times

BY LAURIE LARSON

ALTHOUGH MANY TRUSTEES MIGHT TAKE it for granted, Dennis Eisnach never will. The simple act of sitting down to discuss shared problems and arrive at mutually agreeable solutions has a greater value to him than to most.

A trustee of St. Mary’s Healthcare in Pierre, S.D., since 1994, Eisnach was head of the South Dakota Highway Patrol in the mid-1970s when the American Indian Movement (AIM) spoke out powerfully against the injustices it perceived on the Pine Ridge Lakota Reservation and elsewhere. Responding to FBI stakeouts surrounding the reservation, Native American residents made Pine Ridge an armed camp. Before the standoff ended, two FBI agents were killed. What followed were four arrests of Native Americans, followed by massive protests, including marches on the state capital of Pierre. Eisnach was there for all of it. His job: to allow the protests but keep the peace.

“There are 800,000 people in the whole state of South Dakota, and the highway patrol is the largest law enforcement [body] in the state,” Eisnach says. “We were called in for civil disobedience demonstrations all over the state. The patrol was the law enforcement presence in all of it. . . . We had to establish credibility with the governor upfront.” These tensions went on for three years. “We [the AIM and the state government] had to find the common ground that existed—that was the key to the peace,” Eisnach says. “Also, both sides wanted to talk only to the people who could do something, who had credibility and the influence to really make changes . . . and there had to be trust.”

So, to put it mildly, he knows a thing or two about mediation, something that has served him well since.

“Dennis provides quite a balance; he looks at both sides of the issue dispassionately,” says Jim Russell, CEO of St. Mary’s for the past 23 years. “He thinks very logically and carefully before he acts. His presence develops a comfort level for all sides, just by being there.”

He’s a great sounding board, too. He’ll reflect on what you say and can talk about the pros and cons—at the end you have a clearer image of what you want.”

Eisnach’s connections have been as valuable to his board as his clearheadedness. The current governor was the state’s attorney general when Eisnach was in charge of the highway patrol, and because of this relationship, Eisnach was able to help break a stalemate between St. Mary’s and state employees.

As the largest employer in the state, the group wanted an insurance discount for using St. Mary’s, the only health care facility in the area. St. Mary’s thought the requested discount was too high. In response, the state tried to send its employees to health care facilities three hours away. So, a few months ago, Eisnach volunteered to step in.

“Dennis went to [the governor] to jump-start negotiations,” says Dalton Huber, St. Mary’s chief financial and compliance officer. “The governor respects Dennis’ ability [as a negotiator] . . . He was received cordially.”

Eisnach is typically modest in assessing his own efforts. “It got the process going again at least,” he says. “I was able to talk to [the governor], and now we have different people from St. Mary’s and the state looking at the situation again. We’re making progress.”

Eisnach has been equally involved in encouraging changes in his own institution through a year-old quality improvement program called the Guiding Coalition for Service Excellence. The coalition was created at the suggestion of Catholic Health Initiatives, which owns St. Mary’s.

Huber remembers Eisnach as “quick to respond” when trustees were asked to attend the coalition’s meetings. “It has given the employees a boost to have trustee support there,” Huber says.

Eisnach describes the coalition as “an all-out effort to change the culture of institutions, how we deal with patients and each other.” Even in the relatively short time that they have been meeting, he says he sees a big difference.

Concrete examples of coalition service improvements include: a streamlined check-in process, more phones in the waiting room, staff patient escorts—rather than just giving directions through the mazelike hospital, and staff permission to “make things right” on the spot.
when there is a problem.

“When something doesn’t go right for a patient, a nurse can bring up flow-
ers from the gift shop to say, ‘we’re sor-
ry,’” Eisnach explains. “It’s empowering
staff at the local level . . . and the more
we make changes, the more into it
employees get.”

Eisnach has always enjoyed being
useful. In 20 years on the highway patrol,
he remembers, “I enjoyed being out on
the road and helping people . . . . I did-
n’t like arresting people.” He did like
finding good candidates for a difficult
job, however. “I got to choose who we
hired—doing background checks and
psychological profiles,” he says. “I was
proud to be screening—choosing the
right people.”

Qualities he sought in highway patrol
candidates included stability, non-aggres-
siveness, and a lack of preconceived
notions about law enforcement— “not
seeing just black and white,” as he puts
it. “You have to decide on the spot [of a
law enforcement situation] ‘how far will
this go?’ You have to have good judg-
ment and not be on an authority trip.”

He believes he has that kind of per-
sonality himself, which “hopefully serves
me on the board and gives me credibil-
ity with other board members.”

In the five years Huber has known
Eisnach, he says, “He really knows how
to handle himself. You can come away
from a disagreement with him still lik-
ing him. He is a very good listener.”

“What I learned in dealing with peo-
ple under stressful conditions is that you
have to learn to read people, and how far
you can go to get them to sit down
together,” Eisnach says. He is thinking
of those tense days in the 1970s. “What
level of trust are you at when you sit
down? There has to be an acceptance of
the other person’s position.”

For deeds past and present, he might
even be thought of as an archetypal hero.

“He would have been great crossing
the West with the wagon trains, coming
up with logical and straightforward solu-
tions,” Russell muses. “If I were on a
long [survival] trip, I’d want to go with
him.”

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