



Director's Corner

A Tribute to Carolyn Merritt

At the 2009 Annual International Symposium of the Mary Kay O'Connor Process Safety Center, Ms. Carolyn Merritt was honored posthumously with the Center's Merit Award. Carolyn Merritt was chairman of the US Chemical Safety Board (CSB) from August 2002 until August 2007, died in on August 29, 2008, after a long and characteristically tough fight against cancer. I chose the words "characteristically tough" intentionally because that is what she was. If she believed in it, no fight was unwinnable and you could rest assured that she would put everything in the fight. When she was nominated to the CSB, she had already completed a career that spanned 30 years working as a high school teacher, as a general foreman, environmental manager and corporate officer. But her signature assignment would be her last as the chairman of the CSB in government service. In my opinion, Carolyn Merritt left her indelible mark on the mission and role of the CSB in process safety issues in the chemical industry. The second day of the 2009 Symposium, the opening session was a tribute to Carolyn Merritt and her accomplishments. It was also an opportunity to talk about the direction and the role CSB has been playing in the process safety arena since Carolyn righted the ship.

Carolyn Merritt went to school at Radford University obtaining a degree in Analytical Chemistry. In addition to being passionate about her job and family, Carolyn's interests were traveling, gardening, teaching Reformation Theology and "yes, can you believe it, motorcycling." From the 1980s to 1994, Carolyn had several jobs with increasing responsibilities at Champion International Corporation and Tennessee Chemical Company. From 1994 to 1995, she worked for RMT, Inc. I also was working for RMT at that time and had the privilege to work with her at that time. I could you tell you numerous anecdotes about my interaction with her at that time, but let me summarize them all by saying that as I look back at those two years, I am not surprised by what Carolyn went on to later on and her accomplishments at the CSB. Soon

Carolyn moved on to her next assignment and two years later in 1997 I moved to my next assignment, *i.e.*, to my current job at the Mary Kay O'Connor Process Safety Center. From 1994 to 2001, Carolyn served as Senior Vice President for Environment, Health, and Safety for The Vigoro Corporation and then IMC Global, a billion dollar agricultural chemicals company with as many as 12,000 employees.

During our work at RMT, Inc. we happened to work together on several projects. Even at that time, I was impressed by the strong conviction and commitment Carolyn showed towards environmental, health and safety issues. Carolyn insisted on a quality job, was willing to call it like it was, even if that meant losing a project. After she left RMT, she joined The Vigoro Corporation which later on became IMC Global. Within two weeks of her joining the new company, she called back and said she needed help. She wanted to mould the Environmental, Safety and Health programs within the company in her own vision and she knew that she needed expertise and help from outside and she was not afraid or threatened by either admitting it or asking for help.

In July 2002 when President George W. Bush nominated her as the Chairman of the Chemical Safety Board, Carolyn Merritt was prepared for the challenge. A career of working in facilities that manufactured chemicals, fertilizers, pharmaceuticals, munitions, minerals, and pulp and paper had prepared her for the challenges she faced in a fledgling new agency with questionable reputation and numerous critiques. She had experience in research, quality control, process engineering, plant operations, wastewater treatment, environmental compliance, worker safety and executive management. She wanted to bring her experiences in working with communities, industrial managers and workers to reduce the risk at facilities and prepare for emergency response in the event such an event were to occur. She eagerly wanted to continue her work as part of the Chemical Safety Board.

Through my personal interactions with Carolyn as well as a thorough reading of her public comments and speeches, I have tried to summarize Carolyn's core beliefs:

- OSHA's 1993 Process Safety Management standard was an important milestone in improving plant safety and protecting workers, residents, and the environment
- Management must set the pace and driving force for process safety programs
- Management and operating staff should work in concert in the implementation of process safety programs
- Process safety regulations and programs save lives and prevent substantial environmental damage
- The chemical industry is an important contributor to our economy and quality of life
- Government has a significant role to play in verifying the safety and compliance of chemical manufacturing facilities and facilities that use hazardous chemicals in their processes
- The Chemical Safety Board should work in partnership with enforcement agencies, the regulated community and Congress to determine how best to use lessons learned from incident investigations to prevent their recurrence
- Prevention has to be the ultimate reason for regulation
- The CSB can be an important vehicle to achieve effective prevention
- The combination of academic, industrial, and agency experience is needed for progress in process safety performance

With these beliefs Carolyn Merritt came to the CSB and set about charting a new course. I am sure that even her worst critics would agree that she brought her executive and organizational skills to move the agency forward; improve morale and effectiveness; and achieve the support and respect of this Committee, sister government agencies, and industry. Those who knew about her work knew about her untiring work towards improving workplace safety as well as environmental performance. During her 5-year term at the CSB, she committed the fledgling agency to build on a new legacy. She brought great vision and energy to the CSB. When the agency was struggling to find its own image and identity, she provided great leadership in righting the ship and establishing the CSB as a respected federal agency producing quality incident investigations and disseminating lessons learned. There is no question that she has left an indelible mark and her legacy at the CSB.

Carolyn was ideally suited to the role of CSB Chairman when she was appointed by President George W. Bush in 2002. As I said earlier, prior to becoming the chairman, Carolyn had served for many years in executive roles in major corporations with responsibility for health, safety, and environmental issues. But she brought more than her experience and expertise to the agency. Carolyn believed passionately in the CSB's mission. She worked tirelessly to save lives of workers and the public through chemical accident prevention, insisting on thorough investigations and meaningful safety recommendations.

Carolyn led a great renewal of the agency, establishing it as a highly respected institution in the field of chemical process safety. She greatly increased the CSB's productivity and its impact on safety. She worked hard to recruit new staff and build bridges with colleagues worldwide. Words cannot begin to express the extent of everything she accomplished. The safety community has lost a remarkable woman and a trailblazer.

M. Sam Mannan
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