

The First ADHD Awareness Day

Michele Novotni, PhD

It all began twenty years ago with an unsolicited phone call. The national office of ADDA—the Attention Deficit Disorder Association—received a call from someone claiming to work for a senator who asked if there was something they could do to help promote awareness for adult ADHD. Although our secretary assumed it was a prank call, she passed the message on because it had a Washington, DC, area code. As co-CEO of ADDA at the time, I called back just in case it was legitimate.

Much to my surprise a senate aide answered and said that he worked for Senator Maria Cantwell from Washington state. An unnamed tech executive from an unnamed large company had reached out to Sen. Cantwell because he felt there were probably many individuals with undiagnosed and/or untreated adult ADHD. He asked the senator to see what she could do to help.

I discussed the opportunity with ADDA's president, David Gierwer, and co-CEO, Evelyn Polk Green. We decided it was worthwhile for me to take a trip to Washington, DC, to meet with Mark Rupp, the senate aide, and see what might unfold. It was my first time visiting the US Senate building, which was both impressive and intimidating. Mark and I discussed the problems faced by adults with ADHD and brainstormed ideas to help them. We landed on dedicating a day for ADHD awareness by US Senate proclamation. He asked that we prepare a packet of information to present to Sen. Cantwell that included research on the challenges of adult ADHD, statistics, and opportunities for helping those individuals. We also needed to present a list of potential awareness day opportunities that we could have ready to go for a date only a few months away.

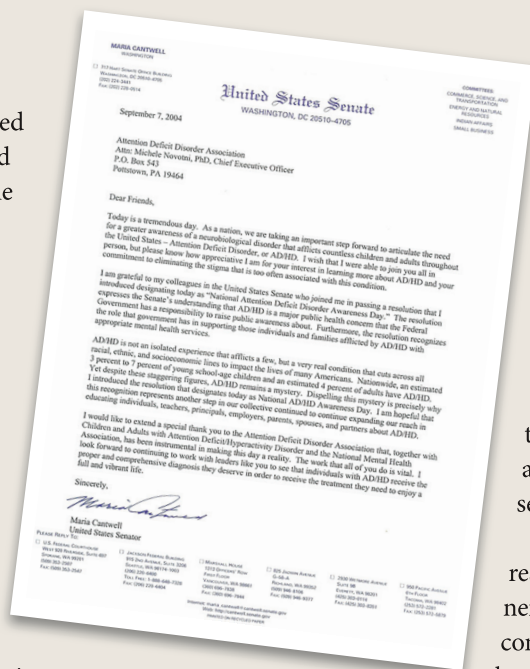
We called an emergency ADDA board meeting to secure support for the proposed venture. The board sprang into action and compiled the information in only a couple of weeks, with some assistance from *ADDitude* magazine. Armed with these documents and proposed activities, I returned to DC on a Friday, making a “detour” on my way to North Carolina for a long-awaited beach vacation.

When I presented all the requested information, Sen. Cantwell’s aide said we had more than met his expectations. He proposed an ADHD Awareness Day—with the Senate needing to vote on it the following week before they broke for the summer. A copy of the resolution would need to be formatted and in their boxes on Monday. When he showed me what a US Senate Resolution looked like, there was a very pregnant pause before I asked, “How does this pile of information become that form?” He smiled and said, “That’s all up to you. And I will need it Monday morning.” Hoping that it would not be that difficult, I was ready to leave when he added three additional required items. First, since ADDA was a relatively small organization at the time, he wanted us to secure the National Mental Health Association and CHADD—two larger organizations—as coauthors. We would also have to broaden awareness to include ADHD in children *and* adults and get another senator to agree to co-sponsor the resolution.

Now this looked like an insurmountable task, so I asked that we aim instead for the next session to allow us time to address these tasks. Unfortunately, that was not an option as the senator would be up for re-election and would not put it forward at that time. I left the Senate building with our pile of research and statistics, and a sample of a US Senate resolution in hand.

I had promised my husband that I would not be working during our vacation, but he agreed that this was extremely important. I had not even brought my computer. I reached out to David and

Evelyn seeking guidance regarding the gargantuan task. We delegated tasks and agreed to regroup while putting out an urgent request for board approval and assistance. Evelyn had connections and would try to get her senator’s support, I reached out to CHADD and NMHA, and David started diving into the resolution. A definite advantage of a small organi-



zation is the ability to quickly respond to opportunities

While Evelyn was having some success with securing Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois as a co-sponsor, I did not make out too well. Undeterred, we looked over the sample resolution and felt it shouldn’t be that difficult—sort of like writing a college term paper with footnotes. Even though we had not secured the participation of CHADD or NMHA we decided to at least try to get the resolution written and see what we could do on that front later.

And so began the cramming to draft a resolution in less than three days. I found a neighbor who was willing to let me use their computer. David, Evelyn, and I began writing by phone and sending materials to each other by email, assisted by various ADDA members who looked up references and reviewed drafts.

By late Sunday night we had actually produced and submitted a document that looked to us like a US Senate resolution, with all the necessary “whereas” terms backed by research, stating that undiagnosed and untreated ADHD was a challenge to both individuals, families, and workplaces. We proposed that the US Senate declare an ADHD Awareness Day to help bring national attention to this issue. We still did not have the two other organizations on board, but we hoped to reach back if the resolution was good enough.

To our delight, Sen. Cantwell approved of the resolution we had written and Sen. Durbin agreed to co-sponsor the resolution! However, they insisted that the two other major organizations participate, and we had only a couple days before the formal resolution had to be submitted to get on the docket. Reaching back to CHADD and NMHA with an approved resolution still presented a few challenges, but fairly quickly we reached agreements and added both organizations to the resolution.

The resolution passed unanimously!

David and I flew out to Seattle, Washington, to attend Sen. Cantwell’s event promoting the first ADHD awareness day. ADDA, CHADD, NMHA, and *ADDitude* magazine all scrambled to present awareness events and activities throughout the country to celebrate the first “National Attention Deficit Disorder Awareness Day” on September 7, 2004. **A**



An internationally recognized expert in the field of ADHD, **Michele Novotni, PhD**, is the former president and CEO of ADDA, an inspiring speaker, bestselling author, psychologist, coach, and parent of a young adult with ADHD. She is the coauthor of *Adult AD/HD* (2003) and the author of *What Does Everybody Else Know That I Don't? Social Skills Help for Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder* (1999).