

## **Jerel Noel FirstPoint Management Resources Senior Account Executive: Leading Through Crisis**

**Jerel Noel, CAE discusses the lessons he learned as president of Association Executives of North Carolina during the worst crisis the world has faced in recent memory – the COVID-19 pandemic.**

Like many people who manage business and non-profit organizations, Jerel Noel, CAE took the scenic route to find the perfect career fit as executive director of Cardiovascular Credentialing International, an organization devoted to providing credentialing services for medical professionals specializing in cardiovascular procedures and treatments. CCI is a client of FirstPoint Management Resources in Raleigh, N.C.

In addition to managing a staff devoted to credentialing, Noel's duties also include working with volunteer leaders who make up CCI's Executive Committee, Board of Trustees and Board of Advisors, including helping them develop their leadership skills both within CCI and in their own professions.

Noel has also been hard at work, cultivating his own abilities as a leader. Little did he know as he became president-elect of Association Executives of North Carolina (AENC) in 2020, and then president in 2021, that his leadership would be put to the test in a big way.

Noel was born in Florence, Alabama – right up the highway from Muscle Shoals, known as the hit recording capital of the world. After earning a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Alabama in 1997, Noel made his way to Raleigh in search of opportunities.

After three years, and feeling restless in a job he was in, he signed on with a local staffing agency, which sent him to Olson Management Group – now FirstPoint Management Resources - to fill a temporary assignment.

"After I met some of the people there, I figured it would be a nice change of environment and would give me some good experience for other jobs elsewhere," he said. "It took me a little while to figure out what an association management company was, but thanks to association professionals such as Penney Duh-Pah and (the late) Dave Field, I was able to make the connection quickly."

Noel's temporary job became permanent, and his search for a great career ended right there. He has spent the last two decades honing his talents as an association executive through his job and his involvement with AENC.

He happened to be elected president of AENC, just months after the world had come to a screeching halt in middle of the COVID-19 pandemic.

AENC is a professional society of individuals who manage business and trade associations headquartered in North Carolina. A wide swath of the organization's membership is made up of hospitality professionals – hotel and conference facility executives, destination marketers, and convention and visitors' bureau managers – a sector that was economically devastated by COVID-19. AENC, which hosts a myriad of conferences, trade shows and events, held virtual meet-ups but did not gather in person for 16 months, except for a golf tournament in September 2020.

Noel describes the lessons he learned as a leader during a global pandemic.

**What led you to the association management profession and why it is a good career for you?** As I mentioned before, my entry into association management was totally by chance. I didn't see it as career. For my first two to three years, I kept my resume ready as I felt there was something else out there. It wasn't until I became the Membership Director of the American

Society of Echocardiography that I felt this is something I can see myself doing for the long run. It was a great organization with a great staff team. ASE's Executive Director, Robin We-gerink and the ASE leadership had a lot of confidence in me and allowed me to grow and realize the things I liked about this work...people and passion for your profession.

In 2008, I made the decision to leave ASE and take a position with another FirstPoint client, Cardiovascular Credentialing International (CCI). The attraction to CCI was their connection to ASE as they provided certification exams to a portion of the ASE membership. I quickly learned that the credentialing world was much different. CCI's Executive Director Aaron White played a huge role in me making that transition. Sort of like the leadership at ASE, he pushed and entrusted me with major responsibilities. This was all key to my knowing that I wanted to commit to be an association professional. In 2014 I decided to take that next step in my commitment by preparing for the CAE exam. I worked with a study group overseen by AENC and passed the exam in May 2015. It was during this time that I became the Executive Director of CCI, my current position.

**Describe your involvement in AENC why it was important for you to get involved in leadership?** I didn't really get involved with AENC until 2009. FirstPoint decided to exhibit at the AENC trade show. At the time, FirstPoint's previous General Manager, Dave Field, was on the AENC Board and he was key to getting more staff engaged with AENC. In 2010, AENC President Tina Gordan reached out to me and asked me to serve as Vice-Chair of the Annual Trade Show. This was the AENC's biggest event, and it gave me the wonderful opportunity to interact with a number of AENC members and most importantly the wonderful staff which at the time was led by Jim Thompson and Jovita Mask. Volunteering on committees and being able to interact with and learn from other association professionals outside my organization was a big part of my professional growth.

**In the years leading up to serving as president of AENC as you served on the board and moved through the chairs, what were your expectations?** It is funny you asked that. As someone who for years had worked to create great experiences for volunteer leaders, my expectations were different. I wanted to do what I could to be of the best assistance to the AENC staff. If that meant helping exhibitors move their stuff into the exhibit hall for the trade show as the Trade Show Committee chair or reaching out to potential speakers as chair of the Professional Development Committee that is what I would do. I just wanted to do what I could to best complement the outstanding AENC staff.

As I transitioned to serving on the Board, I still wanted to be a huge help to AENC's staff but with a stronger focus on the mission and more consideration of the organization's long-term goals.

**When you realized you would be leading an organization of your peers during a pandemic with all in-person events shuttered – and when roughly half the members are in hospitality, one of the hardest-hit business sectors, how did you shift your view of leadership?** As a Board, we wanted to make sure we were empathetic to the new world that our members were dealing with and provide them with the comfort of knowing that AENC would be a place where they could remain engaged with the association community. Prior to me coming in as AENC President, the Board had made the very forward-thinking decision to establish a scholarship fund for members to maintain their membership within AENC. This allowed many of our members in the hard-hit hospitality industry to remain engaged.

**What has been your most important focus this year?** The AENC mission, is "Help our members be successful." While last year has created some challenges, that very simple concept continued to be our focus.

**What were the greatest challenges?** Keeping a positive outlook. Early on, it was very easy to focus on everything that was wrong due to the pandemic. While we wanted to provide

opportunities for members to share their concerns and challenges, we made several intentional efforts to create opportunities to collaborate and share experiences as people were successfully navigating through these unprecedented times. One example that comes to mind was our Winter Conference in February 2021. We brought together industry experts from various positions within the meetings and events industry to discuss what the association profession should expect to see as they returned to live events in 2021. The experts also shared how they had overcome the challenges of 2020 with new and innovative solutions.

**What are you most proud of?** The example we were able to set for our members. We did our first virtual conference in the fall of 2020. It was still at a time when people were trying to navigate and figure how they were going to develop virtual activities. Many members were able to see some of the elements that we showcased and gain the inspiration to execute events for their respective organizations.

In the spring of 2021, we held our first hybrid event and showcased ideas and things to consider for planning for bringing people together for face-to-face meetings.

Many of the changes we have made in the last year to navigate have great potential for the future. It will impact the ways that we connect and engage. I am proud that we were able to show members the possibilities.

**What lessons did you learn from leading through crisis that will carry you into other leadership roles?** Meeting people where they are. In early 2021, we were looking to plan an event that would take place in late spring. The event was going to take place outdoors. While we thought people were anxious to get together, we learned early on that there was a good part of our membership that were not comfortable to commit to such an event so soon. It was a good reminder about taking the time to listen to your membership and “meet them where they are”.

**As an executive director who reports to a volunteer president and board of directors, how did your experience as a volunteer leader for AENC influence how you see your own job and relationship with the presidents you serve?** It reinforced my understanding of how important the relationship between the chief staff officer and the chief volunteer officer is for health of the organization. There must be clear lines of communication and trust between those two individuals to ultimately do what’s in the best interest of the organization and what aligns with the mission of the organization.

**Any advice to share with the leaders who will follow in your footsteps?** As a chief volunteer officer, you will be exposed to more of the day-to-day items related to your organization, but it is important to also think about and keep the Board’s focus on the “long game.”

**Feel free to add any thoughts you have.** All opportunities to lead come with unexpected challenges. It may be a difficult Board member, a staffing change, or in my case a pandemic that halted just about everything in the world. Effective leaders are open to looking at such events as opportunities to improve through implementing new ideas.

*FirstPoint Management Resources is an AMCI-accredited association management firm in Raleigh, N.C. which provides exceptional experiences for non-profit leaders. Contact us -through our website at [www.fpmr.info](http://www.fpmr.info) for information about our association consulting services, administrative support for executive directors, and full-service association management.*