

I remember sitting in the Education Committee, years ago, dreaming and discussing the possibility of creating a scholarship that would invest in an industry leader by sending them to the NAA Apartmentalize conference. This year, I am so grateful to say that I was chosen to represent our association as that scholarship recipient. I feel like there was no better year to have been chosen! While we are all collectively recovering from the nightmare of isolation that is/was COVID, conference attendees were absolutely charged and ready to get back to being together and share their newfound appreciation for our industry and time together.

I have been working in the multifamily industry for many years now. I have been to quite a few major conferences, but nothing prepared me for the overwhelming magnitude of Apartmentalize. Not in the “this is too big and scary” sense – but in the “wow, we apartment people must be A BIG DEAL!” sense. Downtown San Diego light posts were adorned with NAA flags, and skyscrapers were draped with sponsor signs the length of half the building. This was ALL for US? I checked into the hotel, met up with our group (everyone arrived before me), and hit the pavement to check out the town. The streets were filled with NAA members! I couldn’t wait to get into our sessions and feed off the energy.

Walking up to the convention center was, again, a very cool and overwhelming experience. Starbucks and a good DJ greeted me at the door. I slipped through to the map and got my bearings. I was pleased to find that I started out my sessions by attending the region 4 update, a smaller meeting, giving me time to get oriented. Affiliates from the Southern US each took a moment to fill in the guests on the happenings in their areas, as well as key people traveling here from their district. Our Executive Director, Brenda Wells, announced our big name change and then introduced me as the scholarship recipient. Witnesses to this continued greeting me and congratulating me throughout the conference, which made me feel both important and welcomed.

During the regional update, I was drawn to two very specific themes that piqued my interest and followed me throughout the conference: “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DE&I)” and Youth recruitment and development. I wish I could remember the specific region (maybe Columbus?) that was very much ahead of the game in their approach to career development and recruiting for the industry. This affiliate was already working IN the high school system offering certification courses so that these kids would be ready to join the workforce when they graduate. NAA also has this awesome program that honors 20 industry professionals in their twenties, which continues to highlight hard working younger professionals that are going above and beyond in their career! I would LOVE to see our membership work to recruit young people, invest in them (much like this scholarship does), build them up, and focus on them to lead our association in the years to come. Such a brilliant strategy to attacking the staffing challenges in our industry.

One of the major highlights for me on this trip was guest speaker, Magic Johnson! I loved his charm, but also how he used his life in basketball to succeed outside of the court. He defines success as how many other people he helps succeed. He believes you learn from others then pay it forward after you’ve mastered what was taught to you. He told stories of trying to borrow money to open mixed-use properties in impoverished areas because he wanted to build up those communities. He was determined and kept asking for money to build even after being denied. When he finally got the money, he built a Starbucks in inner city LA. When Starbucks wasn’t selling enough scones or other items, he studied his clientele, made changes to the menu, and became one of the most successful Starbucks anywhere! He purposely invests in underrepresented populations to pay it forward. “We can all do good and do well.” He challenged us to take a chance in places that we might not usually think of, stating that we should never underestimate the power of the working-class dollar OR people.

That session continued the theme of investing in people, but also brought about the topic of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion! Now looking at the conference through this lens, I could see that NAA shows us a ton of resources we can use to grow in this way. Back at home and researching on NAA website, I find that they provide information about DE&I business grants, a Leadership program, and scholarships for continuing education! I think this is truly something that every CKAA member needs to investigate and utilize to their fullest potential.

We had a myriad of course offerings, all with different focuses, and all with top notch professionals. One favorite included MFH wild woman, Totally Toni, and a panel of experts that gave 60 (marketing and resident retention) Ideas in 60 Minutes. More famous guest speakers, the handsome and entertaining Rob Lowe and female racecar boss Danica Patrick, and other people who really know what it's like to walk in our shoes each day. The NAA Trade Show was about the most mind-boggling monstrosity I have ever tried to tackle...but alas, I couldn't make it through the entire thing. BUT can you believe I met Top Gun Maverick at the trade show while waiting on my name to be drawn to win a brand new Tesla and \$25,000!!?? Even though I didn't win this time, I did take home a lifetime of memories.

The courses, the speakers, the trade show – now the fun! Honestly, we work hard and do some tough things on a daily basis. We provide and manage people's HOMES, which is the most sacred space a person has. I think our line of work is undervalued and underappreciated most times. Do people outside of the rental housing industry even KNOW what all we do?! For this reason, I find intrinsic value in our membership with this association. Our ability to understand each other and get this opportunity away from the desk to live among other people who share our day-to-day. This was invaluable. We were literally wined and dined, spoiled with concerts, entertained by artists and comedians, and watched the sunset on the water in sunny San Diego. It really was all I hoped it would be. I hope we get to go together next year when it comes to Atlanta!