



Interview with Gerald Lessells

Conducted August 2015

Edited transcript of a correspondence

About Gerald Lessells:

In 1968, Gerry Lessells initiated AICHE's effort to raise the profile of minority engineers in the Institute and the chemical engineering profession. His early leadership of AICHE's Career Guidance Subcommittee for Disadvantaged Youth, and his service as ad hoc Minority Affairs Coordinator for the Institute, opened doors to a more diverse AICHE membership, and set the foundation for the formal launch of MAC in 1990.

Lessells's career in the chemical process industries included many years as Technical Director for the Printing Ink Division of J. M. Huber Corporation. He was a licensed Professional Engineer in Ohio, and has published 27 articles and seven U.S. patents. After retiring to Tucson, Arizona, Lessells did volunteer work in the Department of Chemical and Environmental Engineering at the University of Arizona, and he is currently a volunteer tutor in math and chemistry at Pima Community College. For many years he was active in community organizations dedicated to equal opportunities for minorities in education, housing, and employment, and he is a life member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He has been a member of AICHE for more than 60 years, serving as an officer in the Central Illinois and New Jersey local sections, and as an AICHE director. He earned his BS in chemical engineering practice from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1950.

The following interview was conducted by Gordon Ellis, AICHE Communications.

GE — We're speaking with Gerry Lessells — a past director of AICHE and a pioneer of AICHE's inclusiveness initiatives for minority engineers. He's also one of the honorees at the Minority Affairs Committee's 25th Anniversary Celebration at the AICHE's 2015 Annual Meeting.

To begin, please tell us a little about your background in chemical engineering.

LESSELLS — Over thirty-six years in industry I worked for four CPI companies, after getting my S.B. in Chemical Engineering Practice at MIT in 1950. My work covered a wide range — organic chemical technology, petrochemicals, plastics, chemical coatings and printing inks — in process- and product development, and safety and health/toxicology. My longest-serving position was as Technical Director of J. M. Huber Corporation's Printing Ink Division. During my industrial career, I was fortunate to be able to have 27 published articles, and seven U.S. Patents in my name. However, I feel my most important achievements were in the professional, rather than in technical categories. And I guess my AICHE awards — the Service to Society Award and

the Van Antwerpen Award for Service to the Institute — reflect that thinking.

GE — When did you first become active in AIChE — either on the local level or as a national leader?

LESSELLS — I first became active in AIChE in January 1951, when I joined the Institute. Jim Troyan, who was Engineering Director at Mathiesen Chemical Company in Niagara Falls, New York, where I worked, was Chairman of the Western New York Local Section, and he gave me an absolutely *imperative* pep talk about joining AIChE. I'm sure that Jim was the catalyst that led to my becoming a member of the Institute leadership. I owe him a lot. I served as an officer in the Central Illinois Section in the mid-1960s as well, and in the New Jersey Section in the late 1960s and early 1970s. And I served on national committees from the late 1960s thru the 1970s, including my time as a Director, from 1973 to 1975.

GE — How would you characterize the state of minority member involvement in the chemical engineering profession or the Institute when you were becoming involved in AIChE?

LESSELLS — I had never run across a black chemical engineer until I met one in 1965, when I worked at Mobil. To my knowledge he was not active in AIChE. Then I met Henry Brown at a New Year's Eve party in Metuchen, New Jersey, where we both lived. My late wife and I were the only whites among perhaps 20-odd people. It made me appreciate a little how black people may feel in a sea of white people. However, a most important difference was that I experienced no hostility.... In any case, Henry had been very active in the fight for civil rights, and I was very fortunate in being able to recruit him for our AIChE activity.

GE — Tell us a little about that. What factors motivated you to approach AIChE's leadership about the need to make the Institute more diverse and inclusive?

LESSELLS — I considered chemical engineering to be a lily-white (a term then used) and almost-exclusively male profession — and I knew we were missing a lot of talent out there among minorities and women. In my 15 years in industry, up until 1965, I had met one black chemical engineer, as mentioned earlier, and one female chemical engineer Kathleen Black, who was in my 1950 MIT chemical engineering class of 142 graduates.

GE — How did you make inroads with the AIChE leadership?

LESSELLS — In July 1968, when I had been struggling with launching a minority-oriented career guidance program in the New Jersey Section, I got an unexpected lift. My family was taking a rubber raft trip down the Green and Yampa Rivers in Utah and Colorado, when we met another chemical engineer — J. Frank Valle-Riestra — and his family. Frank informed me that the Northern California Local Section, in the San Francisco Bay area, had been doing just that. This encouraged me to increase my efforts with AIChE National.

Later that year, Henry Brown and I approached some of the leadership with our idea to start a task force. One name I'll mention is Hugh Guthrie. He was AIChE Vice-President at the time, and he offered enormous encouragement to our task force. Tom Tomkowitz was another important person. Once Hugh and Tom understood what we wanted to do, they were instrumental in getting the Council to establish the Career Guidance Subcommittee for Disadvantaged Youth, the first AIChE National attempt to address underrepresentation of minorities in the Institute. And Tom, especially, was very helpful in working with the sub-committee on methods and goals in order to achieve our ends.

GE — What objectives were established for that first task force, and who were some of the key AIChE people you worked with on the early projects?

LESSELLS — Our objectives centered on developing aids for local AIChE sections to establish career guidance activities in schools with significant numbers of minority-group students. And the emphasis was on encouraging such youngsters to pursue the broader goal of a science or engineering education and career — not the narrow one of chemical engineering, alone. The key AIChE people I worked with during those early years were Henry Brown and Bob Ahlert (who was on the chemical engineering faculty at Rutgers Univ.), members of our task force, and Tom Tomkowitz, our Council Liaison.

GE — Do you recall some of the specific outreach activities and successes of the early task force? What were some of the challenges you encountered?

LESSELLS — The task force presented quite a few symposia and panel discussions at AIChE National meetings. And I do remember that these presentations stirred up a great deal of interest in what we were trying to do — or more correctly, that we were suggesting the local sections do. However, follow-up was difficult. All of us on the task force were volunteers, and the demands of the jobs we were getting paid for by our employers had to come first. And, any AIChE staff assistance also necessarily did not have a high priority at the time. So, as I remember it, the task force, which had leveled out in its activities, was not very effective in reaching its goals. When I served on Council, I was able to get established the post of Minority Affairs Coordinator, which I held as a volunteer until the early 1980's, but this was a minimal effort on my part until I turned the post over to Henry Brown, shortly before my retirement from industry.

GE — Henry Brown and James Wei are among the other leaders who will be honored at the 2015 MAC celebration. Do you have anecdotes about your collaboration with Henry or James?

LESSELLS — My recollections about collaborating with Henry Brown in the early task force days are many. But one anecdote which I strongly remember has a humorous side. Henry, Bob Ahlert and I held monthly meetings of the task force, generally unattended by other task force members since they were not in New Jersey, although Tom Tomkowitz attended some of our meetings from nearby Delaware. Bob and I turned in expense reports for these meetings, the meal costs being covered by our employers as legitimate professional-society expenses. Henry's supervisor — a chemical engineer — denied this was a legitimate business expense, since the work was socially oriented. When I heard about this, I remembered that, when I worked for Mathiesen Chemical in the early 1950's, Mathiesen had merged with Olin industries, and the company had then acquired Squibb, Henry's employer. At Mathiesen in Niagara Falls, I knew the personnel manager, Bob Thompson, who subsequently became corporate personnel head at the parent companies of Squibb in New York City. I phoned Bob, he remembered me, and I explained about this episode at Squibb, and that it sounded like my friend's supervisor had not been made aware of their corporation's strong Equal Opportunity Policy. Bob was inflamed and ready to bawl people out, when I explained I'd like this to be corrected as a corporate policy directive in such a way that no one could know anything about what happened. Bob complied, and this is how Henry Brown was legitimately able to recover expenses for his "social" AIChE activities!

Jimmy Wei's activities along these lines occurred after I retired in January 1986, so I never worked with Jimmy. The creation of MAC, of course, was not my doing — it was Henry's and Jimmy's — although I like to think it was an outgrowth of what I had catalyzed over ten years before.

GE — Were there noteworthy development in minority outreach during your term on the AIChE Council?

LESSELLS — Sad to say that I have to answer “No.” Establishing the Minority Affairs Coordinator position made it easy for members of AIChE to direct outsiders to a single source within the Institute to answer questions oriented towards Institute minority activities, but I wouldn’t consider this particularly noteworthy. In perfect hindsight, I think I had become a victim of “burn-out.” I can well remember that in the early work, for example, a great deal of time was spent in finding a title for the task force. There still seemed to be a reluctance to agree that AIChE should be singling out minorities for “special treatment.” It was finally agreed to use the term “disadvantaged” minorities. I remember thinking at the time — with my engineering type, logical mind — that virtually all minorities were disadvantaged, so the term was redundant. However, it broke a logjam in thinking, so the name was perfectly acceptable in order to move ahead.

GE — Overall, what accomplishments of the early diversity task forces were most encouraging to you?

LESSELLS — There is no question in my mind that the great single accomplishment was in changing the mindset of AIChE leadership to see that we had an *obligation* to do what I was suggesting. I knew the profession would benefit by tapping a larger pool of talent, but society in general would benefit from this, too. And, of course, so would the black community. And, not to sound too grandiose, I believed our country would also benefit; opening opportunities to those previously denied them would reduce social/racial unrest, if only in a small way.

GE — Wrapping up — What progress have you witnessed — either in AIChE or in the profession — in regard to creating a more inclusive community?

LESSELLS — I recently viewed the MAC web site. I was overwhelmed seeing what was being done in regard to creating a more inclusive community. I knew something of this in 2001, when the Committee kindly granted me the William Grimes Award. While at the Reno Annual Meeting receiving the award, Henry Brown said he wanted me to attend a MAC meeting. I did, and I was literally amazed at the breadth and scope of MAC’s activities, and, especially gratifying, to me, the great number of black and female faces I was seeing! Again, I had nothing to do with this directly, except to plant some seeds which Henry Brown, Jimmy Wei, and obviously a host of others had turned — to pursue my analogy further — into a horticultural masterpiece.

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