

**JOHN KELLY'S WASHINGTON**

*For Freedom of Association, With Dignity*

**D**uring all of the hoopla over disgraced FEMA chief **Michael Brown**, the descriptor that the media seemed to especially enjoy tossing around was this one: "former official for an Arabian horse association."

There was something so absurd about it — a horse association! — that you couldn't help but chuckle.

But I suspect there were many people in the Washington area who felt, well, if not quite *sorry* for "Brownie," at least a little saddened to see his onetime job made sport of. That's because they work at associations themselves and they get a little tired of hearing people snicker every time they explain what they do.

It applies to a lot of people around Washington, the association capital of the United States and probably the world.

I know from associations because my first job out of college was at the Greater Washington Society of Association Executives, an association of people who run associations. (Or ran associations. GWSAE is defunct now, having merged with the American Society of Association Executives.)

In my time at GWSAE, I learned that some 3,500 associations — from big ones such as the National Association of Broadcasters to small ones such as the Pedorthic Footwear Association — all the Washington area home. In fact, it is quite possible that you or someone you know actually works for an association (or a society, institute or foundation).

Once you enter the association workforce, you often find it a nice place to stay. One of my GWSAE co-workers was **Karen Rainbolt**. After leaving GWSAE, she worked in marketing at the American Production and Inventory Control Society. Now she's managing editor of *Foghorn*, the magazine of the Passenger Vessel Association (think sightseeing boats, car and passenger ferries, whale-watching boats, etc.).

As is true of many in the association biz, there comes a time at most cocktail parties when Karen has to explain who it is she works for, exactly.

"The way that I always explain it is just by asking them what they do and then referring to whatever association that represents *their* profession or industry," she said.

Still, when she tries to explain that association management is a profession — and that you can be an association executive just like you can be a banker or a cowboy — she usually gets "that deer-in-the-headlights blank stare."

That is, it can sometimes be tough explaining that while you may work for the Apple Processors Association or the Resilient Floor Covering Institute, you are not necessarily an expert on apple processing or resilient floor covering. What you are an expert on is associationing: planning conventions, running certification programs, editing newsletters, tracking legislation.

Another acquaintance from my association days

is **Al Rickard**, who has worked for the Snack Food Association, the National Food Processors Association, the Destination Marketing Association International, GWSAE and ASAE. Now he runs his own association marketing and publishing consultancy.

When he worked at the Snack Food Association, said Al, "people always did say to me, 'You must get great snack foods over there.' That was always the comment. My answer was, 'Sometimes we do.'"

While at the Snack Food Association, which is headquartered in Alexandria, Al launched National Snack Food Month and was editor of *Snack World* magazine.

And now I feel sort of guilty, because I think I may have written that previous sentence just because I think there's something funny about National Snack Food Month and *Snack World* magazine. Am I no better than those journalists who made sure to insert "former official for an Arabian horse association" into every story about Michael Brown?

Yes, I think I am. I did my time in the association trenches, so I understand the unique joys and challenges of working at an association. It's not always easy. Instead of customers, you have members. And those members, truth be told, can sometimes be a pain in the rear.

**Chris Vest**, vice president of public relations at ASAE, said his group sponsors a couple of campaigns to raise awareness of what it is that association executives do. One is called "Associations Advance America," the other "Associations Make a Better World."

Said Al: "Most lay people don't understand what goes into running an association, because there is a lot to it. We don't know how good Mr. Brown was at the Arabian Horse Association, but there's a lot of really good association professionals out there who take pride in their work and do it professionally."

**From the Horse's Mouth**

What does the association Michael Brown used to work for have to say about all this? Sadly, nothing.

It didn't return my phone call. The Colorado-based association, which was called the International Arabian Horse Association when Brown worked there and is now simply the Arabian Horse Association, has a statement on its Web site praising Brown's performance, then concludes with this boldface pronouncement:

"Please note: IAHA, now the Arabian Horse Association, will not field any further press calls or inquiries regarding this issue."

I wasn't going to make fun of you! Honest!

*But you may feel free to make fun of me, or anyone else, during my weekly online chat, today at 1 p.m. at [www.washingtonpost.com/liveonline](http://www.washingtonpost.com/liveonline).*