



Benjamin Wallner Elected to *PM* Hall of Fame

APMA's APMAPAC Director is in it for the long haul.

BY PEGGY TRESKY

Benjamin J. Wallner has a reputation as a guy who gets things done. The architect of APMA's VA Provider Equity Act and director of the APMAPAC, Wallner is not to be deterred by challenges some would consider insurmountable. The people who know him best use words like "passion," "loyalty," and "tenacity" to describe him. Wallner agrees that his steadfast dedication to his goals is a key to his success. "Once I've committed to participate in a project or program, I'm in it for the long haul," he said. "I don't just want to participate; I want to lead."

Wallner's childhood in Minnesota was steeped in traditional values of hard work and diligence. It was also marked by the influence of a great uncle who served in the Eisenhower administration, and experiences that taught him to challenge the preconceptions of authority. "I got hooked on politics," Wallner said. During college at the University of Minnesota, Morris, Wallner pursued his interests with a BA in Political Science. He also landed an internship with a political action committee (PAC) that offered him an entry-level position in Washington, DC, upon graduation.

While working for the PAC, Wallner also served as a consultant for a list management and direct



Benjamin Wallner

mail marketing firm. There, he refined skills that would serve him well in the future—data-mining, direct marketing, and targeted messaging. His clients included the Republican National Committee, the National Women's History Museum, and the Service Members Legal Defense Network.

In 2005, Wallner was ready for a new challenge. He interviewed with *PM* Hall of Fame member Faye Frankfort, then-director of Legislative Advocacy at APMA, and was

hired as an associate. "He was professional, self-assured, and had experience in political fundraising," Frankfort said. "He had contacts on Capitol Hill and in the fundraising world, and it was clear that he was well-versed in the many intricacies of the federal laws governing campaign finance." Wallner's primary focus the first year on staff was to nurture the APMA Congressional Outreach Program, an initiative designed to support APMA members holding fundraisers for candidates for federal elected office. With his background in grassroots organizing and fundraising, Wallner seemed a natural fit. In his first nine months on the job, he orchestrated 14 congressional fundraising events, which raised more than \$180,000 from APMA members and friends of the profession. He also worked closely with the chair of the APMAPAC and its Board of Directors to increase APMA member participation in the PAC.

Frankfort and Wallner were approached periodically during his early years at APMA about trouble at the Veterans Health Administration (meetings that sometimes took on a clandestine flair, as VA employees were reluctant even to be seen discussing the issue with APMA lobbyists). Podiatrists were growing increasingly disenfranchised by the

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dramatic disparity in pay and ability to lead at the VA, based on archaic guidelines written in 1976. That disparity was making it harder and harder to keep talented podiatrists on staff to meet the foot-health needs of veterans nationwide. At first, Frankfort and Wallner collected information about internal processes and hurdles at the VA. “We initially felt this wasn’t a legislative issue,” said Wallner, whose assessment was underscored by congressional offices that flatly rebuffed any overtures on the issue. “Congress addresses problems at the VA when and if the VA tells them there’s a problem,” he said. Wallner, true to form, kept at it, but the issue was a non-starter until 2014, when scandal erupted around outrageous VA wait times. “The tables turned dramatically,” Wallner said.

In the interim, Brad Wenstrup, DPM, R-OH, had been elected as the first podiatrist in the U.S. House of Representatives, and was serving on the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs. Nichol Salvo, DPM, now chief of Podiatry at the Atlanta VA Medical Center, was then the director of the Young Physicians’ Program at APMA, bringing with her firsthand experience in VA medical facilities.

ner worked closely with legislators to craft legislation that would address veterans’ access to podiatry by eradicating disparity among physician providers. Rep. Wenstrup introduced the VA Provider Equity Act in the 114th Congress. The bill received outstanding support and

rick DeHeer, DPM, APMA trustee and chair of the APMA Legislative Committee, to build a nationwide network of key congressional contacts, podiatrists who would help to motivate their fellow members to take legislative action when asked to do so.

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passed as part of an omnibus VA bill in the House. As of this writing, APMA and its legislative supporters were awaiting Senate action on its version of the omnibus legislation, and hopes were high that the VA Provider Equity Act would be included in the final, conferenced version of the bill. “There is no doubt that Ben will guide this legislation to eventual enactment into law because one thing is for sure,” said Frankfort. “When Ben sets his mind to getting things done, he works until they are completed to his satisfaction and in the best interest of the profession.”

Wallner has his sights on a bigger prize than the VA, however. “I

Wallner is already far ahead of the game when it comes to fundraising. In his history with the AP- MAPAC, he has increased financial contributions by 50 percent. He has also taken the Kaplan-Clarke-Foster Continuing Education Seminar into the big leagues with an increase in net revenue of 150 percent. Wallner established new processes for the PAC, with liaisons at the state level working to increase participation and donations, and he modernized the PAC’s budgetary processes. “Ben’s passion for the success of our profession is unbelievable,” said Barney Greenberg, DPM, AP- MAPAC chair. “If half our members had the passion Ben has, our profession would have no limit to success politically.”

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“The stars aligned,” Wallner said. Wallner and Dr. Salvo met with every congressional office that would listen, more than 50 in total. Wallner also worked with Rep. Wenstrup, who arranged an opportunity for Dr. Salvo to testify on APMA’s behalf before the Subcommittee on Health of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs.

It soon became clear that APMA would have to pursue a legislative fix to the disparity at the VA. Wall-

ner believe that the snowball effect is what podiatry should work toward. Let’s get some victories under our collective belt. Those victories will fuel the next victory and the next.” A win at the VA, he believes, could be just the impetus the profession needs to finally push change on Medicaid and other long-term issues. To accomplish these wins, APMA needs two critical ingredients: manpower and money. Wallner is working closely with Pat-

In June of 2011, following Frankfort’s retirement, Wallner was promoted to director of APMAPAC. He is now acting director of Legislative Advocacy at APMA. His colleagues agree that Wallner is particularly deserving of recognition for his many contributions and his outstanding commitment to the profession’s long-term goals. “Ben’s dedication to podiatry and APMA is unsurpassed,” said James R. Christina, DPM, APMA executive director and CEO. “He works diligently every day to advocate and advance the profession.” “I have long admired Ben’s passion for what he does and his attention to detail,” said Denis Russell, CPA, CAE, APMA deputy executive director and chief business officer. “He is truly an asset to the profession.”

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Tributes

Faye Frankfort

I knew immediately that I wanted to hire Ben when I interviewed him back in 2005. He was professional, self-assured, and had experience in political fundraising. That was the expertise I was looking for.

I was not fully aware, however, of the personal traits and talents that contribute so much to his successes—both in his life and in his work. Ben is incredibly tenacious and will not give up on pursuing a goal, winning a political issue, or furthering a cause. He is fiercely loyal to the podiatric profession he represents on Capitol Hill, as well as to his APMA colleagues, his many friends, his family, and his faith. And he is steadfastly honest, a trait not often associated with those in the political sphere. While his political ideology is strong, it does not prevent him from successfully working with or having good relations with those of differing ideologies.

Ben's primary responsibility when hired was to manage and grow the American Podiatric Medical As-

sociation Political Action Committee (APMAPAC). That included raising its visibility among APMA members, increasing member participation, and ensuring that APMAPAC functioned within the confines of the convoluted federal fundraising laws. He did that successfully, increasing member contributions by 50 percent over the past 11 years and never compromising its function legally.

grasp other operations of APMA's legislative and political affairs. He studied the history of the APMAPAC. He learned the legislative and policy issues that APMA fought for or against for its doctors. He became active in political issues that impact students and

run the APMAPAC Board and now the legislative department to achieve their goals. Prior to the elections, he set up future leadership in the House and Senate to be lead co-sponsors of our HELLPP act.

Ben is a caring, compassionate, extremely goal-oriented profession-

**“Ben’s dedication
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—Christina

residents. Most recently he took on veterans' affairs issues, engineering the introduction of legislation to elevate the recognition of doctors of podiatric medicine in the VA.

There is no doubt that Ben will guide this legislation to eventual enactment into law because one thing is for sure. When Ben sets his mind to getting things done, he works until they are completed to his satisfaction and in the best interest of the profession.

Barney Greenberg, DPM

Ben is a precision-driven, bright young man who puts every ounce of

al who always plays to win. Losing is not in his vocabulary. He always finds positive ways to go forward, even in the most difficult situations. He is a true friend.

James R. Christina, DPM

Ben's dedication to podiatry and APMA is unsurpassed. He works diligently every day to advocate for and advance the profession.

Denis Russell, CPA, CAE

I have long admired Ben's passion for what he does and his attention to detail. He is truly an asset to the profession. Congrats, Ben!

Peggy Tresky, MA

I am delighted to extend my congratulations to my friend and colleague Ben Wallner on this well-deserved honor. Ben has always reminded me of the old General Patton saying: "Lead me, follow me, or get the hell out of my way!" His honesty, energy, and passion for this profession set a high standard for his peers to follow. I look forward to working with him for many years to come as he continues to pursue APMA's goals with customary zeal. **PM**

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and in the best interest of the profession.**

—Frankfort

his knowledge into making himself a success. He is always politically correct, articulate, and walks the walk and talks the talk.

Ben's passion for the success of our profession is unbelievable. He gets very upset when our members do not get the need to be politically active.

Ben has singlehandedly taken the VA Provider Equity Act and situated it to a position of passage. He has

It didn't take long for Ben to



Ms. Tresky is Director of Communications for the APMA.