

I have spent the past few years jealously refreshing all of my social media feeds at the end of July for constant updates from attendees of the ACS Conference and Competition. This year, I was finally able to attend for myself and experience it all firsthand. Attending the conference has helped me in more ways than I am probably even aware of right now. It has given me more confidence in my daily work and helped me make connections with people in my region and across the country. I keep trying to think of a way to describe my experiences there and keep coming back to the term magical. It may sound hyperbolic, but that is how it felt. I am a high-strung, incredibly anxious person and I have never felt so at ease with strangers and in large groups as I did during the conference. I was able to walk into rooms where I did not know anyone and immediately feel at home because I could feel in my bones that these were my people. It was a magical weekend and it meant the world to me to be there and to be part of it.

The opening session with Ari Weinzweig was the perfect start to the conference, especially after the high stress of studying for the CCP exam. Going into this session, I was still in a fairly rigid mindset from studying. Ari's discussion of how beliefs inform behavior is something that seems so obvious now, but I had not thought about it before. It was a great way to get out of the mindset I was in and keep my mind open heading into the rest of the weekend. This is the session that has affected me the most. It has given me a lot to think about in my time since the conference. I have been doing a fair amount of introspection about where I am, where I want to be, and ways to get there. It is why I have had difficulty writing this; I am trying to figure out where the line is between what I am comfortable sharing about how this has affected me and what is so personal I would rather keep it private. I believe that people can hear something over and over but will only listen to it when they are ready to. Ari had a lot to say that I needed to hear and was ready to listen to. I am so grateful I was there because now I have been able to change my outlook on some personal matters and that has helped me to start building a solid foundation for my future, both in life in general and in the cheese industry.

That first day was packed full of so much to do, I think I may still be catching up on rest. But I also still have an automatic ear-to-ear smile when I think about it so it was well worth the exhaustion. While education is a large part of the conference, so is the social aspect. The conference benefits from the summer camp effect; you know that you have at least one big thing in common with everyone else there and you are sharing a space for a set, limited period. This facilitates forming fast bonds with other attendees. I had heard about ACS being compared to summer camp before and after experiencing it firsthand, those comparisons are entirely accurate. It was fun being able to meet people in various areas of the cheese industry and various points in their careers, from others who are still at the beginning of their cheese careers to pioneers of the American cheese revolution. I am grateful for every person I met at the conference and for the circumstances that allowed us to meet. There was a moment at the opening reception at Maytag Dairy Farms where the sun was just starting to set, I was surrounded by my peers/colleagues/friends, and a folk band was playing a Grateful Dead song. For that moment, everything was perfect and I felt right at home. There were so many small moments like this that I will hold dear to me that could only happen at ACS.

While I am glad I attended and participated in as much as I did, I am also glad that I quickly learned how to take advantage of my unscheduled moments to have some quiet time alone. After staying up way past my bedtime the previous night, I had the best morning. After breakfast, I realized that I needed to get out, do something active, and get some fresh air if I was going to make it through the rest of the day. I took a walk along the river by the event center and, after eyeing the swing set by the bridge at the start of my walk, gave in to the call of the swings. I spent 15-20 minutes swinging as if that swing set and I were the only two things that existed in the world and then went back into the conference with a new energy. This side adventure came back up that evening when my first friend in

the industry introduced me to a new friend; she recognized me as the girl on the swing and I recognized her as the runner who was clearly debating joining me. Not only did my quiet time help me recover from a late night, it helped me make a connection with someone.

We work in a truly amazing industry. I believed this before having the opportunity to attend the ACS Conference in Des Moines and am further convinced now that I have finally been to the annual conference. We are not simply an industry; we are a community. We celebrate our achievements together and sincerely want success for our members. We have an incredible wealth of knowledge and passion. Our willingness and desire to share that knowledge and passion is what initially drew me in and it is part of why I fell in love with cheese. I am eternally grateful to be a part of this community. I knew going in that this would be my first conference of many to come. I returned home from it excited for all that this next year holds for me, what I am going to make happen for myself, that I will be able to share next summer in Denver.