



Paul R. Nelson was born on Seymour Johnson Air Force Base and raised in a military family. He showed an early interest in chemistry, and in high school he was the recipient of a National Science Foundation Young Scholar Grant, which

allowed him to broaden his understanding of cutting-edge chemistry techniques while working in a university laboratory setting. Following this passion, he enlisted in the Air Force as a Medical Laboratory Technician, earning distinguished graduate status from the NAACLS-accredited program. After four years as an MLT generalist, he was selected for a faculty appointment with the Community College of the Air Force's MLT program where he earned Master Instructor status. After completing his undergraduate work and obtaining his ASCP Medical Technologist MT(ASCP) certification, he was competitively selected for a direct commission as an Air Force biomedical laboratory officer. During his active duty career, spanning more than 29 years, he was entrusted with leading laboratories of every size and complexity including a humanitarian mission to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba and a tour directing the trauma lab at Craig Joint Theater Hospital in Bagram, Afghanistan. During his last assignment with the Air Force, Mr. Nelson was handpicked to lead the Air Force Medical Service's COVID-19 Laboratory Team.

Mr. Nelson holds an M.S. from Chapman University in Orange, California. After recently retiring from the Air Force he joined the faculty at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) Medical Laboratory Sciences (MLS) program as an associate professor.

What did receiving the BOC Lab Hero Award mean to you?

"I was humbled to learn one of my colleagues put me forward for this award. Since early 2020, when the pandemic hit, the Air Force Lab Community put together a brilliant team of laboratory scientists to ramp up quality testing capabilities. I was charged with leading this team and the work we did yielded significant benefits across the force. Receiving the BOC Lab Hero Award has given me the opportunity to shine a bright light on the hardworking men and women on the Air Force Medical Service's (AFMS) COVID Laboratory Team. These individuals have worked tirelessly, day-in-day-out, for nearly two straight years to ensure quality PCR testing systems were available and to get them into the hands of trained laboratorians across the globe. Going from zero COVID-19 tests to more than 200,000 tests a week capacity took a lot of behind-the-scenes work requiring significant MLT/MLS know-how to get it done right.

Due to the nature of the pandemic, the majority of the AFMS's COVID-19 Lab Team were still working their full-time jobs managing and performing testing in medical treatment facilities, giving of their precious "spare" time to directly support the COVID team's vision. As such, many of the individual actions of team members went unheralded but the culmination of the team's impact did not go unnoticed. The team was recognized as the 2020 Air Force Biomedical Science Corps' (BSC) Team of the Year."

How did your friends, family colleagues, etc., react to the news that you had received a 2021 BOC Lab Hero Award?

"Many of my family/friends/colleagues who knew what I was doing during the pandemic were not too surprised. They witnessed the late nights, tears of frustration and incremental successes the team was able to put together. Several friends and colleagues who were not aware of what I was specifically doing reached out to virtually pat



me on the back and/or take credit for making me into the laboratorian I have become. Which, to be fair, they definitely deserve such credit as I have benefitted from so many amazing mentors and colleagues over my 30-year laboratory career. Many of those individuals helped shape my technical abilities and encouraged me to stay curious about the laboratory testing environment.”

Everyone gets BOC certification for a different reason, but what is your story?

“After working at the MLT level for more than eight years, I wanted to challenge myself to see if I was good enough to run/manage an Air Force medical lab. To be competitive for commissioning as a laboratory officer, I needed to complete my undergraduate degree and earn Medical Technologist (MT) level certification. I knew ASCP was the gold standard in my career field so my primary focus became passing the MT(ASCP) certification exam. Once I made the commitment to apply for commission as a laboratory officer, everything fell into place. I completed my B.S. and passed the MT(ASCP) exam. Earning my MT(ASCP) certification changed my life because it allowed me to compete for a commission. Once commissioned, I was given opportunities to manage increasingly complex laboratories across the globe while mentoring and learning from laboratory professionals on a daily basis. Being able to lead amazing lab teams all over the globe has been extremely fulfilling both personally and professionally.”

Why did you choose the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) Foundation Fund as your BOC Lab Hero charity?

“The last two years have had an unprecedented impact on daily life around the world and laboratory professionals are at the heart of the solutions to help us move forward. The impact on the medical laboratory profession has been equally unprecedented. The need for highly trained, quality laboratory leaders has never been greater. I chose the UAMS Lab Foundation because of the work the foundation does to improve MLS education and provide financial assistance to deserving students and future laboratory leaders.”

What message would you like to send to all of the medical laboratory professionals around the world this Lab Week? What makes you hopeful?

“While many of our efforts as laboratory professionals go unheralded, our work remains as vital and important as ever, if not more so due to the pandemic. We have been thrust into the spotlight and we have an amazing opportunity to lead by example and show our medical colleagues, as well as the general public, why quality laboratory testing is necessary. Investing in our future, laboratorians are the most vital and important of missions. I am hopeful that our ability to “hold the line” on quality testing will enhance the stature of laboratory professionals around the globe and ensure we continue to have a seat at the table as the benefits of good laboratory work positively impact patient care.”