Counterfactual History and Cancer Education

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As you read this editorial, you are likely in the midst of a new and promising year. As I write these words, the pages of the calendar have fallen much like the snow outside my window. We are approaching the end of a year which yielded both good and bad facing a new year with even greater challenges. The month of December, the month of the winter solstice and the day of fewest daylight hours, is an ideal time for introspection, a time to reflect upon the past and to plan for the future. It is also a time when the television airwaves are full of holiday movies. You may find some of these movies irrelevant, maudlin, and/or poorly produced. There are, however, some that you would consider classics, those special productions that resonate with you and whose message extends beyond the holiday. One movie that I put in that category is “It’s A Wonderful Life.” This wonderful 1946 Paramount production was directed by the legendary Frank Capra. It fared poorly at the box office, but has since become a timeless classic. It starred Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey, introduced Donna Reed as George’s wife Mary, cast Lionel Barrymore as the “evil” Mr. Potter, and a host of other great character actors. A synopsis, for those not familiar with the movie, follows (credit to Bing search engine): “George Bailey is a small-town man whose life seems so desperate he contemplates suicide. He had always wanted to leave Bedford Falls to see the world, but circumstances and his own good heart have led him to stay. He sacrificed his education for his brother’s, kept the family-run savings and loan afloat, protected the town from the avarice of the greedy banker Mr. Potter, and married his childhood sweetheart. As he prepares to jump from a

bridge, his guardian angel intercedes; showing him what life would have become for the residents of Bedford Falls if he had never lived.” Not only highly entertaining, this movie also presents a smorgasbord of ideas to ponder. The most obvious entrée for thought is “what would life be like if we did not exist”. His guardian angel Clarence presents him with a cold, hard look at what the world would be like had he not existed (for those who have not seen the movie, let me assure you that it is very dark). So, I am quite certain that by now you are asking yourself “what does this movie have to do with cancer education”. Perhaps nothing at all or perhaps everything. I recently saw this movie on the big screen and began to think of my own station in life and, by transference, of the many lives that have touched mine. I believe that we all take away something from everyone we have known. Every one of us makes some impression, good or bad, on those with whom we interact. In terms of positive connections, I cannot think of any group more relevant than cancer educators. As individuals, we have benefited from the selfless tutelage of our mentors and have hopefully given even more than we have received to our trainees.

So, what would the world be like if we never existed? Where would the field of cancer education be? More importantly, how would this have impacted the lives of the cancer patients with whom we have connected? If the American Association of Cancer Education (AACE) had never existed, where would the discipline of cancer education be? Would it even “be”? Would cancer patients still be shielded from their diagnosis? Would they be ignorant of where to seek help? How to cope? How to communicate? How to survive??? Where would we be as healthcare professionals? I am not creative enough to present you an adequate description of this alter universe but ask each of you to reflect upon what life would be like if your mentors, or you, or the AACE had never existed. As cancer educators/providers, we are confronted

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with numerous challenges. It is easy to get lost and frustrated in the details of daily life. Movies such as “It’s A Wonderful Life” remind us that every person’s life matters. Life has value not only to the individual but also to those touched by that life. So, when the days are dark and the challenges great, reflect upon all the lives that you touched and the good that you brought and give thanks to all who have touched you.

The above-thought experiment is not new. The genre has existed for quite some time. I recently read a wonderful book entitled the “Churchill Factor” by Boris Johnson. In an opening chapter, he engages in what he calls “counterfactual history” in conjuring what would have happened if Winston Churchill had not been alive to challenge Lord Halifax and the English had acquiesced to the demands of the Nazis. A very interesting situation.

The AACE has allowed each of us to experience a number of positive contacts. The past meeting of the AACE gave witness through numerous presentations and networking. Below are just a few of those who were recognized for their efforts and who touched our lives.

Margaret Hay Edwards Achievement Medal

- Douglas D. Ross, MD, PhD

R. Davilene Carter Presidential Prize for Best Manuscripts

- First Prize (tie): Luz A. Padilla, Renee A. Desmond, C. Michael Brooks, John W. Waterbor for “Automated Literature Searches for Longitudinal Tracking of Cancer Research Training Program Graduates”
- First Prize (tie): Katie Cueva, Melany Cueva, Laura Revels, Regina Kuhnley, Anne Lanier, Mark Dignan for “Culturally-Relevant, Collaboratively Developed, Online Cancer Education Modules Inspire Cancer Education Dissemination and Cancer Risk Reduction Behaviors Among Alaska’s Community Health Aides/Practitioners”

Selma Morris Memorial Travel Scholarship Award

- Wytze Aalders
- Katie Cueva
- Caroline Davila

Best Abstract Awards

- Cheryl Holt, Erin Tagai, Sherie Lou Santos, Jimmie Slade, Roxanne Carter, Mary Ann Scheirer, Muhiuddin Haider for “Using a Tailored Report to Stimulate Capacity-Appropriate Evidence-Based Cancer Education in African-American Churches”
- Katie Schoeppner, Heather Moore, Jackie Foster, Katy Engelby, Elizabeth Murphy for “Peer Connect: an Innovative Approach to Meeting the Educational and Emotional Needs of Hematopoietic Cell Transplant (HCT) Patients and Caregivers”
- Katie Cueva, Laura Revels, Melany Cueva, Reggie Kuhnley, Anne Lanier, Mark Dignan for “Collaboratively Developed, Culturally Responsive, Online Cancer Education Inspires Cancer Risk Reduction for Alaska’s Community Health Aides/Practitioners”

Best Poster Awards

- First Prize: Julia Vishnevetsky for “Using Single-Objective Videos to Teach Clinicians Strategies for Patient Education Across a Multi-Site Cancer Center”
- Second Prize: Tesha Coleman for “Developing a Mammography Screening Mass Media Campaign Targeting African American Women in Washington, DC”
- Third Prize: Thiago Silva for “Can the training program for radiographers improve the image quality and the diagnostic accuracy of mammography?”

Happy New Year and be well!