

Fairfield University Graduate Commencement Address

May 23, 2010

Delivered by Fairfield alumnus Dr. James L. Abbruzzese, '74, a recognized leader in the field of pancreatic cancer research and treatment. Born in Hartford, he is the M. G. and Lillie A. Johnson Chair for Cancer Treatment and Research and chairman of the department of Gastrointestinal Medical Oncology at the University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center.

“Doing Something Hard”

Graduates, families, faculty and administration of Fairfield University: First, I want to thank President von Arx, Fr. Allen, and the Honorary Degree Screening Committee for this wonderful honor. When I completed my undergraduate training in biology in 1974 I would have never envisioned being asked to speak to you today. I would also like to thank my wife, Marie, and my son, Jason, for their unwavering support over the years. Without their love and tolerance of my long hours and frequent travel I could not have accomplished many of the things I set out to do.

As I thought about this short address I quickly realized that in my world of clinical practice and research our presentations are often so data-dense that we always speak using slides and that this talk would be done without slides. My son Jason, a journalist, and therefore by training very critical, also reminded me that “college and graduate students are difficult to please unless they are listening to someone they like or want to listen to”. Tough love to be sure!! Well, I doubt I can get you to like me in 10 minutes and wanting to listen to this address could be challenging - based on the fact that I stand between you and the awarding of your degrees.

Before I begin I wish to be one of the first to congratulate you all on the completion of your graduate degrees in your chosen field. Based on my own experience I am sure that graduating from this wonderful University will provide you many opportunities and all of the tools necessary for personal and professional success.

In fact, my own interests in cancer were first stimulated here at Fairfield in a 1973 lecture on the origins and cause of cancer by the late Dr. Donald Ross. I can remember being quite excited to learn what I felt was one of the great secrets of biology and medicine. At that time, theories regarding the viral origins of cancer were just being developed, and while a direct causative role for viruses have not been validated for most cancers, there is no question that the linkage between viruses and cancer generated our initial understanding of cancer-forming genes or “oncogenes” that we now know are some of the most critical genetic elements of cancer causation today. My interest in cancer and its treatment were further developed during my experiences in medical school and residency and ultimately led to my focus on cancers of the GI tract, particularly pancreatic cancer. Recognizing the role of serendipity in one’s life, interestingly one of my professors in medical school first recruited me to Houston where I still practice today.

So what is being done to understand, prevent and treat difficult cancers such as pancreatic cancer? While we still have much to learn, we know that the risk of developing pancreatic cancer is increased in patients that smoke, who have long-standing diabetes, and those that are over-weight – especially individuals that gain weight during their late adolescent and early adult years of life. The relationship between diabetes and obesity suggests that the regulation of energy balance is extremely important in the development of pancreatic and other cancers. However, what these studies do NOT tell us is the personal risk for any one individual. So our goal is to develop a better understanding of individualized risk and to then develop successful strategies for screening and early diagnosis.

For patients who develop pancreatic cancer researchers at Johns Hopkins have just completed the first sequencing of the pancreatic cancer genome. This information has provided incredibly detailed insight into the genetic changes that characterize pancreatic cancer and has already led to the discovery of a new gene linked to families that have an inherited risk of developing pancreatic cancer. International consortia of world-class scientists will now continue these efforts with the results being made available on the Internet to the entire pancreatic cancer research community. This work will, in turn, allow clinical investigators like me to participate in the de-

velopment of new treatments that will be increasingly tailored to each patient. Thus, I think we are on the verge of an era where we will see significant breakthroughs for many challenging diseases like pancreatic cancer.

But, on this significant day in our lives let us take a moment and look beyond our own careers and aspirations, and ask does the acquisition of an advanced degree from this particular University with its Jesuit tradition of service challenge us to also look beyond our personal goals?

Compared to the complexity of today's world I thought things, when I graduated in 1974, were very simple. Yes, we had the cold war, Vietnam, OPEC and gas lines – but no Internet or 24-hour news cycle, and less political polarization. Much like Horatio Alger's rags-to-riches heroes achieving the American Dream, I felt that as long as I worked hard personal and professional success were bound to follow! In short, it was nothing like the socially complex and economically uncertain times that you are graduating into. Revered corporations and even nations are struggling and there seems to be a failure of confidence in our business and political systems, perhaps due to a failure of vision and all too frequently due to the failure of leaders to seek solutions or take personal responsibility for their actions.

So as recipients of advanced degrees from this great University, the question before us all is what we can do to restore faith, personal responsibility, and competence into our every day work and our institutions? As the most recent beneficiaries of the great tradition of Ignatian humanism and Jesuit education I think you are in a uniquely powerful position to make a palpable impact. This does not necessarily imply that you should or need to project an overtly religious flavor to your actions, but to paraphrase the words of Ronald Modras from his 2004 book on Ignatian Humanism "your spiritual energy should project integrity, commitment to justice, and concern for the needs of our fellow human beings". We therefore seek a commitment to address challenging problems with honesty and new ideas, recognizing that there is inherent value in working to solve a difficult medical, social, or economic problem that has remained intractable.

As you have heard I have devoted much of my time as a physician working with pancreatic cancer, a disease that has so far eluded the development of methods for prevention, early diagnosis or effective therapy. Through this work I have learned that there is value in setting your sights on trying to accomplish something in your life that is hard: to challenge yourself to make even the smallest difference in a difficult problem. Indeed, even in this era where technological and scientific accomplishments are so rapidly publicized and revered, there is still value in working to translate scientific progress to patients and families to improve their lives - even in situations where the medical outcome is often uncertain.

What could be the benefits of taking such an approach to one's work? Well, perhaps through incremental progress impact on a difficult problem can be made. Seemingly small advances in the care of patients with diseases like pancreatic cancer can result in gradual improvements in outcome and set the stage for a major leap forward. As is often stated in science and medicine we all "stand on the shoulders of giants" and it is often through these smaller steps that progress is made! In his book "Man's Search for Meaning" Victor Frankl states this beautifully: "Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life; everyone must carry out a concrete assignment that demands fulfillment. ...he cannot be replaced,...thus, everyone's task is unique...."

From a personal perspective, doing things that challenge us frames what we think of as success and provides meaning to life. Again, Frankl states: "Don't aim at success--the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue...as the unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself..."

At the beginning of these reflections I mentioned that my son had given me some helpful advice. One other thing he said (very seriously since he has a substantial amount of personal experience with this) "Dad, don't preach"! Well I'm afraid I was not entirely successful in avoiding this trap. My experiences as a physician with patients and families and with professional colleagues over the years have often involved providing recommendations and advice so it is hard not to fall back onto these old habits. So if I have preached to you today please accept my apologies – but, if I have awakened something latent in how you will approach the future I feel I will have succeeded. Maintain your enthusiasm and attend to the challenges in life that are hard. With the help of God, our teachers and colleagues, and our families let us make a start!

Thank you very much!