



## OUT OF THE RUBBLE: John Po, M.D. '03, Ph.D. '02

The official vote was to cancel Research Day. Drexel University had just assumed leadership of MCP Hahnemann after its parent organization, Allegheny Health System, declared bankruptcy in 1998. Morale was at an all-time low, and no one was certain of the future. MCP Hahnemann has previously taken great pride in its long-running Research Day, held every spring. After this vote, however, it would be merely an interesting footnote in the school's history.

John Po, M.D., '03, Ph.D., '02, Student Government Association president at the time, recalls the dire situation. "We had all come out of [the bankruptcy hearings] quite battered. Several researchers had left the institution; labs had their research stalled." In addition to the insolvency, it was also thought that since Drexel University held its own Research Day in the spring, there would be no place for MCP Hahnemann's because "it would be inappropriate for us to overlap.... We should just scrap it, just merge."



Fortunately, the vote to cancel did not sit well with a handful of people, including Dr. Po and faculty members Richard Rest, Ph.D., and Elizabeth Blankenhorn, PhD. Po describes how, after the vote to cancel Research Day, a few people began discussing how they could maintain the tradition, in spite of the absolute absence of funds, the leadership change, and the pervasive belief within Hahnemann that they were "wasting [their] time." According to Po, this core group believed Research Day was "important as a legacy for MCP Hahnemann; that we should not kick over and die on this issue." Their humble goal was survival. They believed there was something unique and special about MCP Hahnemann's tradition of medical and scientific research worth preserving.

Many seemingly insurmountable obstacles had to be overcome, however, before Research Day would become a reality. Logistics and funding were critical issues, in addition to simply attracting presenters and actually creating the program. Once it was determined the event would be held in the fall (itself an intense debate), the committee had about three months to organize the entire event. Richard Rest, Ph.D., who served as dean of biomedical graduate studies at the time, modestly says, "I supported John as much as I could.... At that time, it didn't take much.... It was the students who started it." Po, however, remembers the dean's administrative, financial, and moral support as invaluable.

In the midst of all the criticism and doubt, Po recalls insisting, "If everybody does their part, their one, single, little part, and we have several people that are committed to doing it, we will



get this done." Fortunately, "everybody did their little thing and did it well."

About 25 to 30 abstracts were submitted for that first Research Day. There were three or four platform presentations. There was a speaker and a cold lunch and the day ended promptly at 4:30 p.m.

"We were just happy to get the darn thing altogether," Po reveals. "We had platform speakers, a main speaker, and an afternoon poster judging session. Then at 4:30 we announced the

winners. I said, 'Well, thank you very much. See you next year.' So we did it. Some people were quite surprised we were able to come up with an organized [event].... That was the beginning." Rest says, "We were all trying our best, and of course, it worked out."

Even with this modest beginning, ambitious seeds were planted. When the organizing group wanted to name the event "Research Day," Po recalls arguing, "That's really, really boring. There's no inspiration there. Remember, this is something you want people to aspire to. *Discovery Day*. I think that's where the entire thing came out."

Discovery Day has certainly come a long way from its modest beginnings.

In October 2009, over 300 abstracts were submitted. There were 12 panel presentations and a newly endowed, internationally recognized keynote speaker. Over 500 people attended. The cold lunch has been replaced by a formal awards banquet at the City Line Hilton. Esteemed alumni are invited back as judges, and their own events and symposia stretch over two days. Students hail Discovery Day as a valued time to connect with alumni and learn from their experience. Indeed, many credit Discovery Day as a flagship event for the College of Medicine, both for its celebration of academic inquiry and its inspirational tone.

Po credits the synthesis of MCP Hahnemann and Drexel as the genius engendering the day. He employs the image of the chimera, the mythological hybrid beast, to illustrate how the various parts of each institution have become more powerful once combined. He says, "A lot of the core values from MCP Hahnemann...merged with the practicality and inspiration of Drexel.... This is actually the best of both worlds. From this rubble that we had at MCP Hahnemann, [Discovery Day] has now come out to be really a much better program and event." He elaborates, observing, "Discovery Day is one of the best examples of being able to achieve something better than the parts in terms of what each of our separate institutions could ever have done on its own. We've been able to come up with a research day that isn't just academic but inspirational."



*Discovery Day Poster Presentations*

Rest is similarly proud of Discovery Day's evolution. "I tout Discovery Day to a lot of my colleagues outside of Drexel Med," he says. "I never thought I would be such a chauvinist for Drexel Med, but I'm becoming more and more of one. There are very few places that spend the money and the effort to have a research day like this.... This is pretty incredible."

Barry Waterhouse, Ph.D., current vice dean of biomedical graduate and postgraduate studies, and Rest credit Po with galvanizing those early students and saving Research Day from becoming a mere footnote. Po is quick to cite the administrative and moral support he received from others at the time as leading to the day's fruition. For example, Kirsten Larson, Ph.D., volunteered to be the chief judge for the first Discovery Day. She has served in that capacity ever since, "a monumental task for a volunteered position," as Po notes. Yet it is apparent that many, many people are involved in Discovery Day's success today. Waterhouse explains, "This is an event organized in a partnership between the graduate students, the Office of Biomedical Graduate Studies staff – which does a spectacular job – and Patty Comey and her Alumni Office.... It's not a one-man show at all.... That's how it has really evolved over the years." Rest adds, "The person-power out of Barry's office is just amazing...the planning is amazing. It just doesn't happen that many places."



*John Po, M.D., Ph.D. receives the Distinguished Discovery Award from Barry Waterhouse, Ph.D., Vice Dean of Biomedical Graduate and Postgraduate Studies*

In 2010, Po was presented with the Distinguished Discovery Award. He observes, "This year when I went back, I never would have thought [Research Day] would end up like this. I really didn't. It's really an honor when Dr. Waterhouse said, 'This is your legacy to the University.' I never thought that during my Ph.D. years."

Po argues that by continuing to fund the event, particularly through the endowed speaker, the College can attract "excellent, inspiring speakers" to further arouse and motivate its unique community of researchers. "I hope that it can continue to awe, particularly in terms of its prestige and its quality." Discovery Day has indeed become a flagship for the College of Medicine. "It is a *fantastic* advertisement," Rest succinctly observes.

That's not a bad outcome for an event that was almost voted out of existence. "I never thought Drexel would embrace us," Po confides about the rough transition period. "I thought [Research Day] would be MCP Hahnemann's little legacy thing that they'll do on the side.... [Instead Drexel] was inclusive.... There was an integration; now it's part of a greater whole.... I think it can only get better."