

PLEXUS ORIGIN STORY

Hi everyone, it's lovely to be sharing this wonderful event with you. Chris very kindly invited me to share the story of Plexus' origin. So I'm going to begin, like many good stories begin, Long ago and far away –

Although that's not quite accurate because actually the idea of Plexus came about not far away at all, but rather in the old Med Ed building just a few streets over. So let me begin again...

Long ago and near at hand, still probably before some of you were even born, the literary and arts journal Plexus was conceived. In 1998, two first year medical students, Grainne McEvoy and Thomas Kang, came to me with the idea of launching a literary and arts journal for the UCI School of Medicine. Of course, given my love of the arts and my love for medical students' creative projects of all kinds, I enthusiastically agreed.

They proceeded to unfurl the tallest, thickest, glossiest journal of arts and humanities I had ever seen. It belonged to a sister medical school up the 5 freeway that shall remain nameless. It was clear from the production values that this journal likely cost more than the entire UCI SoM budget. As we opened it in awe, we realized that every other page was an equally large, equally glossy pharmaceutical ad, and we decided on the spot that our (at that point purely imaginary) journal, no matter how humble, would never be beholden to any advertisers.

We wanted OUR journal to be a forum where medical students, as well as doctors, nurses, staff, all members of the SoM community, could share stories in different ways, in different voices, perhaps from different perspectives than the clinical accounts that usually circulated in the clinics and hospital. We believed that knowing each other more fully through our stories would lead to greater empathy and greater compassion both for each other and for our patients.

We decided on the name Plexus, suggested by the two med students. I had to google the definition, but once I figured out what it meant, I agreed it was the perfect choice because of its metaphoric implications of a braid or network of many people doing many different things but all

working together for a common good. The first issue of Plexus was published in 1999. Quickly, despite their demanding schedules, other students joined and soon we had an organizational structure that included editors-in-chief, managing editors, layout editors, distribution editors, and the all-important finance officer. Since none of us had had the foresight to double-major in business, we made a lot of it up as we went along. Decisions about submissions were made anonymously but democratically, always over pizza and the occasional surreptitious beer (which as the faculty advisor I never saw).

Putting together the journal each year was a little like the fairytale of Rumpelstiltskin in which the heroine is shut up in a room and told to spin straw into gold. Every year we faced an array of daunting challenges: where to find funds; how to fulfill our vision for the issue with limited resources; how to make the accepted submissions fit together artistically and in the allotted pages (I definitely developed renewed respect for former high school year book editors). There were unexpected changes in student leadership. Some years there were too few submissions. Other years, too many (one year some aspiring photographer submitted about 100 photos – thank you iPhone). Another year someone (not a student) anonymously submitted an overtly racist piece (which we rejected); a different year we struggled to decide whether a sensuous depiction of the human body was art or not (we decided it was).

Around February each year we usually doubted whether we could spin our artistic straw into gold; but miraculously, when April rolled around, there was the new issue, always spectacularly beautiful, always unique in its own way, yet always honoring the essence of the issues that preceded it.

Over the years, the journal evolved. We added an audio version that contained original musical compositions as well as professional level performances. One exciting development starting around 2015 was the creation of Project Rx, a supplement to Plexus that focused on marginalized and underrepresented voices in the SoM community. One issue told the stories of LGBTQ physicians and staff. Another highlighted the often unseen hospital workers, housekeepers, interpreters, front- and

back-office people, who keep the hospital afloat. Later on, editors introduced the idea of a yearly theme, which led to more cohesive but equally original issues.

Along the way, we added two great faculty advisors, Dr. Tan Nguyen from Family Medicine and Dr. Frank Meyskens from Medicine, and of course for the past two years Dr. McMullin, an exemplary social justice warrior, has helped guide the journal in exciting and socially relevant directions.

Over the years, we came to realize that there was something very healing in the creativity and reflection that went into Plexus. This seemed to be true both for the creatives who contributed their submissions and for the people who perused Plexus. We discovered that not only were we helping to build empathy for others, we were also cultivating self-compassion – the generosity toward self that allowed participants in the Plexus project to value and accept more complex, more unique versions of themselves.

You know, medicine has always been about its stories. When people have the courage to tell their stories authentically and the courage to listen – really listen – to the stories of others, this is where we find the living, beating heart of medicine. At the end of the day, what happens in the hospital, in the clinics is so multifaceted, so nuanced, so full of sorrow, joy, pain, hope, anger, doubt, resilience that only storytelling can possibly contain its complexity. Plexus is a way for everyone in this community to tell their stories, whether through poetry, essays, art, photography, dqn3 or music. When this multitude of patients' stories, students' stories, doctors' stories, nurses' stories weaves together in one intricate braid we all feel a little more connected, reminded that we are all part of something larger and more important than our individual selves. We are a community.