How to Cite this article: Michael Choi, In Memoriam: Jerry Yee, MD, *Kidney360*, Publish Ahead of Print, 2022, DOI: 10.34067/KID.0004262022

**Article Type:** Reflection

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**DOI:** 10.34067/KID.0004262022

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**Key Points:**

**Abstract:**

**Disclosures:** The author has nothing to disclose.

**Funding:** None.

**Author Contributions:** Michael Choi: Writing - original draft

**Data Sharing Statement:**

**Clinical Trials Registration:**

**Registration Number:**

**Registration Date:**

The information on this cover page is based on the most recent submission data from the authors. It may vary from the final published article. Any fields remaining blank are not applicable for this manuscript.
In Memoriam: Jerry Yee, MD

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Jerry Yee, MD, Division Head of Nephrology and Hypertension of Henry Ford Hospital and Medical Director for Greenfield Health Systems, passed away on June 9, 2022, at the age of 62.

Dr. Yee authored > 200 peer-reviewed publications, and received numerous prestigious awards from our kidney community and beyond, yet the impact of his efforts measures well beyond his CV. He was a leader, master-clinician, and scientific researcher who devoted his career to the mentoring and education of nephrologists, trainees, health care providers and patients with kidney disease. He is cherished by those he has mentored, collaborated with, and those he took care of, as patients and/or as friends1.

Jerry’s publications and research covered diverse areas of nephrology (chronic kidney disease, end-stage kidney disease, acute kidney injury, hypertension, and electrolyte disorders). He collaborated as a member of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Chronic Kidney Disease Surveillance Team, and the SPRINT Research Group, being senior author of the manuscript showing the benefits of a lower blood pressure target in patients with CKD2. His research was innovative, using his expertise in computer science to develop, patent and publish computer algorithms for the diagnosis and management of electrolyte disorders, anemia management, hemodialysis prescription and adequacy, and aspects of continuous renal replacement therapy (citrate anticoagulation, and sodium replacement for hyponatremia).

The American Society of Nephrology (ASN), National Kidney Foundation (NKF), American College of Physicians (ACP), and American Board of Internal Medicine (ABIM), all recognized Jerry’s multiple talents and expertise. At ASN, he was appointed Program Director, Content Designer, and speaker for the ASN Renal Weekends and Highlights. Jerry chose teams of speakers to distill the most impactful and innovative talks at the ASN Annual Meeting in six specific content areas which were presented domestically and internationally. Much like a general manger of his beloved sport of baseball, Jerry picked and rotated the 3 members of the specific content teams, mixing veteran leaders with talented young presenters. The latter benefitted from the veteran mentorship of the other team members as well as the international exposure. He was co-director of the Nephrology Self-Assessment Program for 6 years. He often paired veteran and younger co-editors to develop enduring material which critically reviewed and summarized current publications in each clinical content area with cases and questions regarding diagnosis and therapeutics. For these efforts, he received the ASN Service Award as Co-director in 2019. A unique master of all trades, he also served the ASN on the Informatics (Chair), Web Presence, Publications, Medical Student Education, Post Graduate Education, COVID-19 Response team, and Abstract review committees.

Jerry equally contributed to the mission of the NKF. He was Editor-in-Chief of Advances in Chronic Kidney Disease (ACKD) from 2009-2019, being asked by the NKF to stay on well beyond the usual tenure of an Editor. Each monthly issue reviewed a specific nephrology topic as he extended invitations to colleagues to become co-editors for each issue. Of note, 40% of these editors were women. Many of the editors and editorial board members were at early stages in their careers where recognition of their expertise was crucial to expanding their up-and-coming
status and served as an important affirmation of their expertise. Each issue was introduced by his insightful editorials that pushed well beyond a simple summary of the topic. Notably, Jerry’s editorials were concluded by discerning quotes from books, movie scripts or songs that demonstrated he, the Renaissance nephrologist, could connect with everyone. For his service at the NKF of Michigan, he was presented by the NKF with the first Kidney Crusader Award for his “philanthropy and donation of his time in the foundation’s efforts to be a lifeline for people affected by kidney disease.” He was also selected as a Program Committee member and Chair of the NKF Spring Clinical Meeting. For all these contributions, the NKF awarded him the Donald W. Seldin Award which recognizes clinical excellence as a physician, teacher, and researcher. In his acceptance speech he said that the “award is special because it represents equally those entities that inspire exemplary care of kidney patients: teaching, to entrust one’s knowledge to future generations of nephrology healthcare providers and research, the genesis of that knowledge. Simply, it’s not one or the other that drives excellence; it’s both.”

Jerry was equally celebrated for his efforts and accomplishments by organizations outside of nephrology. He was appointed by the ACP Michigan Chapter as Program Director for the Annual Meeting and was also a member of the Education Committee. Acknowledged as a physician with extraordinary impact in practice leadership and medical research, he was conferred Mastership of the ACP. He also served the ABIM as a member of the Nephrology Subspecialty Board.

At the international level, Jerry was asked to be a reviewer for the Kidney Disease International Global Outcomes Guidelines starting in 2011 and was also appointed to the Renal Informatics Committee of the International Society of Nephrology. He was recognized as a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, an honor bestowed to those who have made standout contributions to medicine and who are identified as changemakers for better and more equitable healthcare.

I have struggled to fully convey what Jerry meant to the people he touched, and for this I ask all who knew him for your forgiveness. No matter what the subject, Jerry’s words will always be better than mine. His ACKD editorial for the Leadership in Nephrology issue was entitled Leadership as Tribal Leader. He explained his philosophy of leadership with several headings which had references to movies (First, Break all the Rules, Think Broadly (Enter the Dragon), Keep Promises (The Godfather), Win the Crowd (Gladiator), Do What is Expected...and more (Raiders of the Lost Ark), High Expectations as the Norm (The Devil Wears Prada), and Mentoring and Succession Planning). He stated his leadership style was to “not so much lead or dictate, but be a reflector of ideas, a rotating mirror within a circle of peer-colleagues...” with the goal that “all divisional members would be leaders, just at different times.” Regarding mentorship, he wrote, “do not confuse teaching for mentoring. There is overlap, but not as much as one may think. American Indian tribes developed their tribal Elders from within. Those chosen to become elders began their training at a young age...They received lessons to learn social and cultural mores intrinsic to the tribe by their thoughtful and generous Elders.
Generosity of time is crucial to mentorship. Giving time to the mentored when there is no time to give is elemental. Goal setting for the mentee and goal achievements are equally important. Otherwise, the relationship is apprenticeship, not mentorship. Bidirectionality of thought and knowledge is the goal of an aspirational mentor-mentee relationship. In the end, the mentor ought to learn from the mentee- the truest measure of a successful relationship.”

Major Jerry Yee, who was awarded the Army Commendation Medal and Meritorious Service Medal with Oak Leaf cluster and was buried with military honors, lived by the creed he wrote about above. He served his country, family, friends, patients, and the nephrology community. Jerry’s legacy is simply his unparalleled generosity. The scales of relationship bidirectionality were never quite equal with him as he gave so much more than he received. He befriended and mentored those he thought were, are, or with his help, had potential to be, the tribal Elders in nephrology. Perhaps as a community, we can aspire to be like these ideal mentors and leaders by doing, as my dear mentor and friend would often say, “our best, better.”

Disclosures: The author has nothing to disclose.

Funding: None.

Acknowledgments: The content of this article reflects the personal experience and views of the author(s) and should not be considered medical advice or recommendation. The content does not reflect the views or opinions of the American Society of Nephrology (ASN) or Kidney360. Responsibility for the information and views expressed herein lies entirely with the author(s).

Author Contributions: Michael Choi: Writing - original draft.

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1. @HFHNephFellow (2022, June 10) retrieved from https://twitter.com/#!/HFHNephFellow