



UMB News

Alumni Share an Evening with Dr. Ken Jeong

March 5, 2021 | By [Alex Likowski](#)

In the field of medicine, MD is the terminal degree. The pinnacle. The top. But on Feb. 23, more than 1,400 University of Maryland, Baltimore (UMB) alumni had a chance to hear the unique perspective of someone for whom receiving his MD was just a steppingstone on a path to becoming one of America's most successful comedians and comedic actors.

During the program titled "*An Evening with Ken Jeong*," host and UMB President **Bruce E. Jarrell, MD, FACS**, engaged in a freewheeling conversation that ranged from the ways life and experience inform comedy to working in the entertainment business during the pandemic, but always following the unusual path taken by guest Ken Jeong, MD.



Bruce Jarrell and Ken Jeong

Even before Jeong completed his undergraduate studies at Duke University, he says he was "bitten by the acting bug" in an introductory acting course. He even auditioned and was accepted into Duke's drama program

but declined the offer to focus on his pre-med studies.

His love of medicine did maintain the upper hand over his love of acting, particularly comedic acting — for a while. Jeong earned his MD at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. While completing his internal medicine residency in New Orleans, Jeong won the "Big Easy Laff-Off" and soon moved to Los Angeles in pursuit of a career in entertainment. Still working as an internist there, he honed his comedic skills performing at the Improv and Laugh Factory and was invited to make several television appearances, from Comedy Central to BET to *The View*, whose cast declared him "the funniest doctor in America."

"I can't imagine being dead serious with a patient," Jarrell began, "and then be able to turn the switch. How do you split your head to be able to deal with all this?"

"Comedy was kind of my golf. It was my hobby," Jeong replied. "When I was in my residency, or when I was practicing ... people really saw me as ... kind of an intense, stressed-out doctor. When patients found out that I did stand-up comedy, people in my practice were actually very, very, very happy for me. I remember one of my patients was like, 'I'm so happy because you're so stressed out, you just needed like a break sometimes, because you're just so intense.' So, if anything, I took that as a great compliment that I was very dedicated to my job and very laser focused on my medicine. So that was my very silly unwinding before me. Now I'm doing that for a living."

Jeong got his first chance to *play* a doctor in front of the camera in the 2007 film *Knocked Up*, and he used not only his experience but also the personalities of other doctors he worked with for the role of Dr. Kuni.

"It was really tapping into my own backstory for that, like telling Judd Apatow, the director, 'You're catching my character on a bad day, a very bad day.' So, in many ways, it was a fun character-actor exercise as an actor where you can, in many ways kind of push those boundaries that you're doing in a fictional character to tell a story that ultimately has a happy ending," Jeong explained. "I remember Judd Apatow telling me and Seth Rogen, who was an executive producer as well as the star, 'We really believed your anger, and we really believed you felt like a burned-out doc.' "

The "laser focus" Jeong says he learned as a physician made him a big hit in his breakout role two years later as the frenetic gangster Mr. Chow in *The Hangover*. "I remember the director Todd Phillips said he was always very shocked at how kind of quiet and unassuming I was in between takes. And so I wasn't like a method actor, you know, being crazy and naked the whole time. I was a guy who was just dedicated to my craft."

Since then, Jeong has starred in numerous roles on the big screen, like *Crazy Rich Asians*, *Transformers: Dark Side of the Moon*, and *Despicable Me*. On the small screen, viewers know him as Ben Chang on the NBC series *Community* and as Dr. Ken in the eponymous ABC sitcom he created. These days, Jeong appears on Fox's *The Masked Singer* and *I Can See Your Voice*, which he hosts and is an executive producer.

For the benefit of audience members likely unfamiliar with Hollywood behind the scenes, Jarrell probed for some inside information.

"So, another thing that caught my ear, one of your comments was that as you became more mature as a writer, you would go into the writers' room and help them, quote, 'break' a story," he said. "That was a new term to me. What is 'break' a story? And how do you 'break' a story? Where do you come up with these ideas?"

"Breaking a story really is an outline. Usually in episodic television, like *Dr. Ken*, we would have usually three stories: an A story, a B story, and C story," Jeong said. "And it could be anything from, let's say, 'Dr. Ken can get sued for the first time,' that could be a compelling A story." The B and C stories, he went on to say, are subplots woven in that help maintain the pacing, introduce opportunities for humor, and bring the rest of the cast into the episode.

"It's incredibly hard to think of something that's new, that hasn't been done before, to try to give the viewer some sense of authenticity, maybe based on my own experiences," Jeong said. "My wife is a breast cancer survivor, and still cancer-free, after 12 years. So I wrote an episode inspired by my wife's journey where my character's wife was confronted with the possibility of having breast cancer. And so, in how to make that in a sitcom form and how to make ... you can't make that funny," he added. "But I was always trying to challenge myself to really do dramatic storylines, doing a sitcom format. My ambition was very high, and I really wanted to tackle very difficult storylines."

"What do you think? Did the audience get a message? Do they understand something better?" Jarrell asked.

"Yeah, I mean, with the breast cancer storyline, me and my wife in real life, we appeared at the very end of the episode. And we did a PSA [public service announcement] of getting screened and getting a mammogram. And I do a lot of work with Stand Up To Cancer. And so, I contacted the CEO there, she's a

friend of mine, and we got Stand Up To Cancer to sponsor the episode and to give them their focus as well. So, in many ways, that particular episode was like a mission,” Jeong said.

“That’s pretty phenomenal,” Jarrell said, “because it’s so difficult to get these messages out to people, particularly about preventive medicine. Once they’re sick, they realize it’s important. When they’re not sick, they don’t attach significance and they don’t get to do this, whatever we get a PSA or whatever, for a mammogram, which I’m sure is not the most comfortable thing. This is a medium that I don’t think I would have thought of as a way to get that message across.”

The two doctors also explored the similar themes that run between medicine and comedy, particularly the importance of improvisation.

“I’ve always equated medicine with improv, and I think that in medicine, it’s if you’re having a symptom, you have to improvise and go down certain algorithms, and I’m calling audibles finding a test. And let’s say there’s an outcome that you’re not expecting on that test. And then you have a skill set and you have a playbook that has been cultivated for decades,” Jeong offered. “I remember, even our oncologist when we’re exploring treatment options for cancer, he even said it out loud, just to himself but also to us: ‘Certain aspects of this treatment we’re going to have to improvise.’ ”

Jarrell, a longtime transplant surgeon, was quick to agree. “Yeah, I can tell you being a surgeon has a lot of improvisation at times. Some of you in the audience will remember there was a time when we didn’t have ultrasound or CT [computed tomography] scans. When you decided to take someone to the operating room, it was on history, physical exam, and experience. So you didn’t have a whole lot of script. Nowadays, you have a much better script.”

But for all the serious talk of medicine and writing theory, a certain amount of discussion on just being famous was bound to occur.

“People have a tattoo of you?” Jarrell asked, incredulously. “That’s got to be phenomenal!”

“I feel like my whole career is an out-of-body experience. Like when people show their tattoos on social media, it’s mostly Mr. Chow or *Community*, I don’t even know what to say,” Jeong replied.

“I hope it was just your face, though, of course,” Jarrell said.

“It was just my face, Bruce! Don’t be Mike Wallace right now. This was just supposed to be a friendly interview. It’s not *60 Minutes*,” Jeong retorted, taking mock offense.

Whatever the audience may have expected from the varying and highly entertaining discussion, they were certainly left with inspiration about the value of self-examination, embracing one’s gifts, and accepting the guidance of mentors.

“My medical residency director, he was my mentor. He said that if you do comedy full time, think of it as blending your medicine in comedy and blending your comedy in medicine,” Jeong explained.

“That’s a real mentor, a mentor who encourages you to do more than just his or her specialty in medicine, but rather to develop a whole other aspect of your life,” Jarrell offered. “And I guess you look back on that and say thank goodness he didn’t talk me out of becoming a comedian but in fact encouraged me to make it even richer than I could have made it on my own.”

“You know he really gave me a Zen-like attitude,” Jeong said. “His words of wisdom — I was impressionable in my mid-20s — really resonated with me and really gave me peace that I wasn’t so strange pursuing comedy and medicine at the same time. It just really helped me enjoy my journey.”

SHARE THIS ARTICLE

The University of Maryland, Baltimore is the founding campus of the University System of Maryland.
620 W. Lexington St., Baltimore, MD 21201 | 410-706-3100
© 2021 University of Maryland, Baltimore. All rights reserved.