

July 15, 2008

Blythe Danner Awarded Prestigious David B. Kriser Medal by NYU

Actress Honored for Efforts Promoting Earlier Detection of Oral Cancer

Actress Blythe Danner was presented the David B. Kriser Award at the 2008 graduation ceremony of New York University's College of Dentistry. Ms. Danner was honored for her passionate advocacy of improved healthcare and her successful and tireless efforts to promote public awareness of oral cancer.

Previous recipients of this award, which is named for the late industrialist and benefactor for whom the university's Dental Center is also named, include: Dr. Michael C. Alfano, former dean of the College of Dentistry and current executive vice president of the university; former Surgeon Generals of the United States Dr. Richard H. Carmona and Dr. David C. Hatcher; Donna Shalala, former Secretary of Health and Human Services; New York congressman Charles Rangel; and Dr. Dominick P. DePaola, president and CEO of The Forsythe Institute.

Ms. Danner has been a compelling and high-profile voice of the need for earlier detection of oral cancer following the 2002 death of her husband, award-winning producer and director Bruce Paltrow, from the disease. In 2005, she began her relationship with the Oral Cancer Foundation by appearing in a very well-received and widely broadcast public service announcement on the need for earlier detection of oral cancer. Since then she has also given numerous interviews with leading magazines and television programs, generously sharing her very personal and moving experience in hopes of inspiring the public to receive regular oral cancer examinations.

More recently, Ms. Danner and the Paltrow family, have formed the Bruce Paltrow Oral Cancer Fund in collaboration with the Oral Cancer Foundation. This fund continues Mr. Paltrow's vision of helping others less fortunate by focusing on areas of the United States where disparities in healthcare exist.

In her speech to over 400 graduates of the dental school, Ms. Danner spoke of losing her husband of 32 years to a disease about which they had previously known nothing. She challenged her audience to take the knowledge they have gained in school and passionately transfer it to their patients in a way that makes them comprehend the need to make oral cancer screening a "non-negotiable annual event in their lives." By doing so, she told the new doctors, they can truly become "catalysts and instruments of change," and help reduce the death rate from oral cancer in the process.

Oral Cancer Foundation founder Brian Hill, who was asked by the university to escort Ms. Danner to the podium for her speech, said, "The Oral Cancer Foundation is deeply grateful to Blythe Danner for her selfless generosity in sharing her very personal story with the public in hopes that other families might be spared the pain and sorrow that this disease has caused her family. New York University could not have selected a more deserving or dedicated honoree for this prestigious award."

Acceptance speech for the award.

I would like to thank the University for this honor, and especially for the opportunity to receive it at this particular occasion.... here with all of you who are about to enter the world as new doctors.

While I have come to be known as an activist and vocal champion of environmental causes during my lifetime, my choice to do so came from a gradual realization that were we to stay the course of our behaviors in the custody of our world, we would eventually negatively impact all that is around us in an irreparable way. Much like how scientists, and the public have slowly ... perhaps too much so....

come to learn, understand, and finally accept the realities of global warming, it was a process that took me many years to comprehend and embrace before I became a spokesperson for change.

My initiation and involvement in the realm of cancer advocacy was much different. It came as an abrupt, and unexpected sudden thunderclap. One which insidiously approached without warning, without a prelude of dark clouds or rumblings, and in the most painful way possible, changed my life, and that of my family forever. In 2002, I lost my husband to a disease we had never heard of, oral cancer.

Over several months, Bruce developed a chronic hoarseness, which while obvious, was not immediately acted on. No one in our world, even medical and dental professionals, spoke to us of oral cancer, and it certainly was not on our minds as we explored his emerging illness. Like many Americans, we were not really aware of the disease, nor cognizant of the risk factors or the early signs and symptoms of it. I wish that we had known more. An earlier diagnosis might have changed the outcome.

Graduating from a prestigious institution such as NYU, I am confident that all of you have been taught about oral cancer. You no doubt have an understanding of the complete disease process, perhaps even the details of the microscopic cellular changes that take place in its progression. But now that you are entering the world of daily interactions with the public who will become your patients, you must transfer that knowledge and understanding to them in a manner that raises their awareness. With a purposeful passion that makes them understand that an annual screening for the disease is a non-negotiable annual event in their lives, and in your practice. In a realm where the cosmetics of the oral environment sometimes takes precedent in their minds, you will be creating an understanding that may save a life.

Only when we have an informed and aware public, combined with non-complacent medical and dental professionals that are aggressively engaged in early detection, will we be able to bring the death rate from this killer down. Late stage discovery is the largest contributing factor to the death rate. For a disease which the majority of the time is visible to the naked eye, or palpable with the fingers, this is an unacceptable situation. As sad as that is, it does reveal a clear opportunity. Engaging in routine, opportunistic screening of patients will allow discovery at early, highly survivable stages. It is possible to bring the death rate down.

Those of you here today, are the best hope of capitalizing on this opportunity, one with benefits both tangible and immediate. Change is within your power, lives within your hands. As you leave this institution, and enter the world of practicing doctors, I hope that you will carry with you not only the knowledge to make a difference, but the desire to be the catalysts and instruments of change. We must all be the change we wish to see in the world.

I again wish to thank the university for this honor, and the privilege of addressing you here today.