

The butterfly effect

By Dana Cook Grossman

As scientific concepts go, the “butterfly effect” has to rank as one of the more intriguing. For starters, it has nothing to do with entomology even though it’s named for an insect.

Then consider the fact that it has literary roots, in a 1952 Ray Bradbury short story about time travel. Called *A Sound of Thunder*, this science fiction classic is based on the premise that the life or death of something as inconsequential as a butterfly can alter the course of history.

The idea attained scientific status in 1961 when a meteorologist named Edward Lorenz was studying weather prediction. Using early computer modeling, he observed that a tiny initial change in a complex system, such as the atmosphere, can result in enormous variation in future outcomes. He later used the flap of a butterfly’s wing as an example of an insignificant but transformative action. In 1972, he gave a talk at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science that bore the evocative title “Does the flap of a butterfly’s wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?”

Today, “butterfly effect” is a term so accepted that it’s in *Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*. And there are countless exemplars of the concept that tiny, long-ago acts generate ripples far into the future.

One case in point begins five years before Ray Bradbury used a butterfly as a literary device. In 1947, a freshman named James Strickler made his way to Dartmouth from western Pennsylvania. It was a time of broadening horizons in Hanover. During the young premed’s sophomore year, Dartmouth President John Sloan Dickey inaugurated a course called Great Issues. It brought to campus luminaries from a variety of disciplines—politics, literature, economics, and especially international affairs, Dickey’s own field. Jim Strickler’s eyes were opened to global issues.

He graduated from Dartmouth College in 1950 and from DMS’s preclinical program in 1951. After finishing his M.D. at Cornell and serving two years in the Navy, he began an academic career of such distinction that in 1967 he was recruited back to DMS as associate dean. He was named dean in 1973 and led the School for eight years. His tenure included many accomplishments, including reinstatement of a four-year M.D. program and a doubling of sponsored research. (It was also on his watch that

Vol. 1, No. 1, of this magazine rolled off the presses—see page 43 for more on that milestone.)

A lot of people would have called a deanship a fitting capstone for a career and gone on to play golf and travel. Not so Jim Strickler. Oh, he’s traveled. But not in the conventional, cruise-a-year manner. After stepping down as dean in 1981, he spent six months in a Thai refugee camp delivering primary care to starving, traumatized survivors of the war in Southeast Asia. It was, he said in a profile in our Fall 2003 issue, “a watershed experience.”

Since 1981, he’s traveled on medical missions to embattled places all over the world. He continued to practice and teach back home, too. He joined the board of the International Rescue Committee and then became its cochair. He was instrumental in the 1999 establishment of a collaboration between DMS and Kosovo, where the Balkans war had devastated the medical system (see page 18 for the latest news from this ongoing initiative).

“Ongoing” is a key word. Jim Strickler has come to realize that sustainability is crucial in international aid programs. High-profile, in-and-out interventions may make good photo ops, but it’s consistent engagement that really effects improvement. In fact, that was the premise of the First Annual Humanitarian Health Conference, held in September at Dartmouth. The brainchild of Jim and a colleague of his at Harvard, it was sponsored by DMS and Harvard and attended by more than 70 representatives of over 40 academic institutions, international aid organizations, and UN agencies.

Yet despite all these accomplishments, Jim Strickler is modest, unassuming, and quick to share credit with others. But sometimes the limelight finds him anyway. It was trained on him at a recent dinner held in his honor in Kosovo. During the evening, the homage paid to him by 10 current and former Kosovar deans was so heartfelt that one observer said he had “never, in . . . 12 years of international activity, seen anything like the tribute bestowed on Jim tonight.”

Clearly, the “butterflies” in this saga—the decision to admit a certain Pennsylvanian to Dartmouth, the emphasis that President Dickey put on international affairs—are generating not just ripples but waves nearly 60 years later. ■

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