2017 Elizabeth Noble Award Winner: An Introduction to Nancy Donovan, PT, PhD

By Jill Boissonnault, PT, PhD, WCS

I am truly honored to introduce the 2017 Elizabeth Nobel Award Winner. I nominated her not only because of her 17 years of service to the Section on Women’s Health -- four as director of research and 13 as editor-in-chief of the Journal of Women’s Health Physical Therapy -- but also because of her quirky, homespun, Prairie-Home-Companion-ish humor and her fierce, unrelenting, and unwavering belief in evidence.

You know, of course, that I speak of Nancy Donovan. Dr. Diane Borello-France, retiring senior editor of the journal, noted in her support letter, “In her role as editor-in-chief, Nancy never settled. Her mission has been steadfast: to advance the SOWH through dissemination of high-quality research.”

Wendy Fox said of Nancy, “Nancy is genuine and honest in all her relationships. She will encourage others to always strive for excellence and lead us all toward that goal.”

Many times when we honor an Elizabeth Noble Award winner, we spend a lot of time extolling their accomplishments, which is understandable and valuable. But I think this time it better to revisit some of Nancy’s own words. Her journal editorials have provided us with a kind of wacky Maine travelogue that somehow eventually connects to the journal issue or encourages us to take evidence-based practice to heart, and she manages to do so with wit and wisdom. Here are a few examples:

Writing on “Punxsutawney Phil’s Prognostication” in February 2016: “Earlier this year I was watching a documentary about hibernation, and I began to think of some of its benefits. However, I could not find any sponsors to pay my bills, so … my thoughts will have to remain unfulfilled.” In this editorial, Nancy went on to extoll the virtues of movement and exercise.

When writing of her beloved aunt, she wrote, “The standards that I was taught were, I believe, responsible for the fact that I am very fond of logic and precision. It is also why I am exceptionally fond of the Krebs cycle and the muscle spindle (yes … I have pictures of them on my wall at home, which a friend recently informed me qualifies me to be a certified member of “geekdom”). So be it. The functioning of each is predictable and precise, and, in my opinion, absolutely beautiful....” And the lesson—wait for it -- “Precision of communication can lead to precision of understanding with no chance of misinterpretation or confusion.”

In an editorial titled, “Ascending ‘G-Code’ Mountain,” she regales us with her trek up a 5,000-plus-foot mountain for which she was woefully unprepared. She wrote, “When we finally made it into the car, I requested a bottle of the electrolyte drink we had, and I know that it took me about 30 minutes to get enough energy to take off the cap of the bottle and another half hour before I could get the bottle to my lips. For the next two weeks, my patients/clients had to wait approximately 10 minutes when I had to
stand up from a chair or a stool, and if someone knocked on the door to my house, I had to yell out, ‘I’ll be there in 10 minutes,’ (and they could see me through the window).” The tie-in to physical therapy was to discuss the push for the profession to be more accountable and to quantify the effectiveness and efficiency of our interventions.

My final comical Nancy-ism, and I quote, “Currently, I have a magnet on my refrigerator that states, ‘Today is not ‘the first day of your life.’ It’s Thursday.’ Of course, factually, the first day of the rest of your life is actually the date of your birth. If you deduce that I prefer objective, factual statements that are supported by well-documented evidence, then to you I say, ‘... Welcome to my world.”

Nancy has been a tireless promotor of research, of moving the journal forward, of making us all better PTs, and of better serving the clients we see. I will end with a quote from another of her editorials about photography, this time on a serious note: “We must not accept that which is not supported by science. We are intelligent professionals. We must demonstrate that intelligence by demanding an accurate and well-documented picture.”

Please join me now in congratulating Nancy Donovan, your 2017 Elizabeth Noble Award Winner!

AUTHOR: Jill Boissonnault, PT, PhD, WCS, Nancy Donovan Elizabeth Noble Nominator, 2017