

## Gabriel Hortobagyi, MD talks about The Leadership Experience

Gabriel Hortobagyi, MD, served as Founding Chair of the Dept. of Breast Medical Oncology from 1992-2012. In an interview conducted in 2013, he talks about the importance of thinking outside the box and describes a bold initiative that this kind of thinking enabled.



### *Thinking Outside the Box: Creating the International Congress of Anti-Cancer Therapy*

You have to become sometimes undisciplined --to think outside the box, you have to let a little of that rowdy, crazy side of you say, “Yeah, I know what the rules are but I’m going to think differently.”

So since about 1983, I have been co-organizing a scientific meeting in Paris. David Khayat asked me to join him as the co-president of the meeting, and we have been doing that every year. As we got closer to the year 2000, we are sitting in at an ASCO meeting at a coffee shop or a bar or something like that. We were thinking what can we do to make an impact for the millennium with our meeting, and we just started to free associate. So we said, “Well, you know, why don’t we ask whether we can rent the Cathedral of Notre Dame for a concert.” So the other guy laughs, saying, “That’s a crazy idea. There’s no way we can pull that off.” So the other one says or I did—I don’t know who—this is just the two of us throwing crazy ideas. “Maybe we could ask the mayor of Paris to throw a cocktail party for all of our speakers.” “Yeah.” “Well, maybe we could then ask the president of France to give a reception in the presidential palace.” “Yeah. That sounds great.” “Well, maybe we could organize a reception dinner at the Versailles Palace—the palace of Louis XIV.” And this went on and on. It was like a soufflé that grows and overflows. If someone more reasonable than us had been listening to us, they would probably have called the men with the white coats. But we got all excited about this. Then we had all of these things written down on a napkin, and we said, “Oh, my goodness. How are we going to do this, it’s a great idea.” So we thought about it for a couple of days. Again we met, and I said, “You know this not such a crazy idea. I think we can pull this off.” So then we said, “Well, this is all fluff. So why don’t we put some really high-powered science behind it to justify the fluff?” I said, “Okay. So why don’t we organize a world summit on cancer research? And let’s invite a number of very high-profile investigators.”

So eventually we put together a list of about forty, forty-five Nobel Prize winners. You have to realize that we were relatively unknown contacting people of the Nobel-Prize sphere and heads of state and what not. To make a long story short, we contacted a number of them. About half of them accepted to come and speak. So we put together this incredible program with the top biomedical investigators of the latter part of the twentieth century. Then we said, “Well, we have our meeting ... So what are we going to do with these people?” So then we asked for City Hall in Paris to be lent to us. We were able to infect with enthusiasm the mayor, who later became President Chirac. He said, “Let’s do that. We have a wonderful large conference area... for the world summit, and I put the City Hall’s resources to your disposal. And that evening I’ll organize a reception.”

The City Hall in Paris is this gorgeous nineteenth century classical building --so we had ourselves a summit. We had ourselves a reception. So then we said, “Okay, well, check one off. Now let’s go to the president’s palace and see if we can play the two against each other.” So we managed to get an appointment with one of the secretaries of the president and explained our plan. And I said, “You know, it would be a shame if all of these personalities came and the leadership of the country is nowhere. So we would also propose that we write a charter.” And by then we had written like a ten-point rights of cancer patients, which we wanted to call initially the Charter of Versailles..... [W]e changed it to the Charter of Paris. Then we said—to sort of entice the president and his entourage, we said, “We can bring all of these personalities, plus we can invite a bunch of heads of state or their delegates to come and sign this in the French president’s palace.” So then he got all excited about it. He said, “Okay. So I’ll offer a signing ceremony here followed by a reception at the Palais de l’Élysée.” So check number two, and then we did something similar with the Versailles Palace. Eventually, not only did we get the Minister of History to give us for free for one night the Versailles Palace but we convinced two of the top chefs in Paris to provide food for free. For 700 of our closest friends.

So you can’t do this unless you let that crazy side of yourself think big and think way beyond where our traditional thinking would restrict us because had we been rational about this we would have said from day one, “This is not possible. Let’s not even try it. We are just going to waste a lot of time being frustrated, and at the end of it won’t have anything.” Instead we kept feeding each other’s craziness in this.

Originally it was called the International Congress of Neoadjuvant Therapy, then we renamed it the International Congress of Anti-Cancer Therapy.

For the signing of the Charter of Paris, we got something like fifty or sixty nations to send us either president, prime minister, or head of health to sign this charter. I invited Dr. Mendelsohn, who is also one of the signers of this document. He was there at the Élysée Palace and City Hall and at Versailles. He got a copy—which is exhibited somewhere in the Rose Building—of this beautiful charter which has the rights of the cancer patient and the signatures of several hundred people who signed on then. Then we put that up on the web and by now we have I don’t know how many tens of thousands of signatures from around the world.

## About the Content

This interview clip was taken from an in-depth interview conducted for the Making Cancer History Voices Oral History Project. This ongoing project currently contains almost 400 interview hours with MD Anderson institution builders.

The transcript has been edited from the original.

The content is available for all uses.

**To explore the full interview go to:** <http://mdanderson.libguides.com/HortobagyGN>

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