Party Like It’s 1699!

By Teaster Baird, Jr., San Francisco State University

If you could travel back in time, what place and time would you go to? Would you go to ancient Egypt to see how the pyramids were built, or would you go back just a few weeks so you could study more for that biochem final that you just took? Whatever your motivation, I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t go to 17th century Europe when it was being ravaged by the plague. Or maybe out of morbid curiosity you would. I did. And you know what? It was a blast and I hope to do it again!

On October 19, 2013, students from the San Francisco State University UAN chapter and I were actors in a themed costume party that was thrown by Guerilla Science. The event was set in the Age of Reason and was branded the “Enlightenment Party.” The party was held in a beautiful, ornate mansion in San Francisco that was open to the public who took full advantage of it. Everyone was dressed in period costumes, with barefooted peasants dressed in rags and elegantly appareled aristocrats, complete with wigs and corsets. Once inside, partygoers watched ‘live’ debates between René Descartes and Sir Isaac Newton and were entertained by jugglers and musicians. They visited Galileo’s observatory and talked with the man himself, or visited the electric Venus to kiss her hand for a shocking experience.

As they meandered, the unfortunate ones were “bitten” by a giant rat that carried the ‘black plague’ and had to be treated by the plague doctor and her patients why leeches and giving them potions that contained arsenic. Luckily for them, a biochemist (and AS-BMB member) from the future interrupted the treatment just in time and told them about the cause of their disease and how it could be treated by these medicines from the future called antibiotics. If what you just read sounds like some bizarrely eclectic fantasy world, then I have successfully given you an accurate description of the Enlightenment Party.

The mission of Guerilla Science is to increase the general public’s science awareness and interest by ‘sneaking’ science in at events and venues that you wouldn’t normally expect science to be featured—such as a costume party in a mansion. Our UAN chapter got involved through my affiliation with the ASBMB Public Outreach Committee (POC). Since one goal of the POC is to increase public awareness and the appreciation of science, working with Guerilla Science was a perfect blend of ideals and action.

At a Guerilla Science event, you get to have fun, be entertained, and learn some science in an engaging way from real scientists. One of the jugglers at the Enlightenment Part was a mathematician who was on sabbatical at UC Berkeley. Mark Rosin, who is one of the co-founders of Guerilla Science is a physicist at UCLA. As the biochemist from the future in the Plague Game, I explained to the plague doctor and her patients why leeches and arsenic were not the best way to go. I got to share some knowledge about the actual cause of the plague,
how infections occur and spread, and how antibiotics work—all under the guise of an interactive theatrical experience. The UAN students got to be peasants—and the rat—that spread the plague among the public. It was an awesome experience for everyone involved.

The major focus of our UAN chapter for the past couple of years has been public outreach and one of our missions is to humanize science for the general public. Guerilla Science’s Enlightenment Party was an opportunity to share scientific information in a fun, creative and innovative way with people who may have had little or no background in science. And they also got to see that scientists are people who know how to have fun and that we all don’t look like Albert Einstein.

Want to get involved with events like this in your city? Learn more by visiting www.asbmb.org/publicoutreach/. Visit the Guerilla Science website at http://guerillascience.co.uk.

Transitioning to the Graduate Life

By Mariam Ayyash, University of Michigan Medical School

It was during this time last year when I started considering my options after college. I had already planned on applying to medical school that summer. I debated a lot about my future during my undergraduate studies, between medical school and graduate school as a means of applying science. Finally, I settled on a plan of trying to do both! I gave myself one year in between completing my undergraduate studies and starting medical school, leaving me with the task of finding a one-year graduate program.

I expected the hunt for the perfect program to be easy. It turned out quite difficult to find a one-year graduate program in the sciences. My research interest as a component for the program did not make things any easier. However, after lengthy nights of googling for the perfect fit, I stumbled across the Biological Chemistry Master’s Program at UM Medical School. What fascinated me about it was the fact that it was a research-based program that required a thesis and full time research commitment. Aside from the research portion, it also required rigorous coursework to be fulfilled to supplement the research component. This program was new to the medical school and this was the first year running it. Hence, it was a nice challenge to take and so I applied and was luckily accepted.

Undergraduate vs. Graduate School

When the program started in September, I couldn’t help but reflect on my undergraduate studies. Gone were the days of memorizing a bunch of facts or pathways within Biochemistry.