

# Researchers “Rock Out” for Scientific Awareness

BY NICK ZAGORSKI

When many of us were growing up, we often dreamed of living the glamorous life of a rock star. Now that we’re older and wiser, we know that the life of a rock star might not be as glamorous as it seems. Still, it has its perks. A case in point: An incident at the visitor’s center for the U.S. Capitol. Normally, musical performances are restricted in its plush auditorium, because the Capitol has concerns about sound vibrations damaging the chandeliers on the floor above. However, when it was revealed that Joe Perry would be part of a tribute event held in that auditorium, the Senate gave the Aerosmith guitarist a special waiver that allowed him to play. Though, just to be safe, it had to be “unplugged.”

As unusual as the waiver was, perhaps even more unusual was Perry’s actual performance — a stirring rendition of Bob Dylan’s “The Times They Are A-Changin,” accompanied by Harvard University neurology professor Rudolph Tanzi and new National Institutes of Health Director Francis Collins. It was an unexpected mix of talent, which spoke volumes about what the Rock Stars of Science Campaign — the focus of the daylong briefing and tribute event — is all about.

The brainchild of Emmy-award winning reporter and producer Meryl Comer, president of the Geoffrey Beene Gives Back® Alzheimer’s Initiative, Rock Stars of Science brings together musicians like Perry, who possess a level of visibility and cachet that can influence public opinion, with top-level biomedical scientists. The campaign’s goal is to bolster awareness and financial support for research conducted in the U.S. and, by doing so, to help speed up the discovery of disease treatments and cures. And through some fun events, like a GQ magazine photo shoot, the initiative also aims to show young people that science can “rock” as a career choice.

The event at the Capitol Visitor Center was held in September and hosted by Research!America, the Geoffrey Beene Foundation, the Alzheimer’s Association, Wyeth, Elan Corp. and GQ, in cooperation with the Congressional Biomedical Research Caucus and Congressional Task Force on Alzheimer’s Disease. In various panel sessions, celebrities, scientists and congressmen discussed



Joe Perry (right) rocks out with Francis Collins and Rudy Tanzi (left) who plays a mean harmonica. RESEARCH!AMERICA

the current outlook and future prospects of medical research, advocacy and funding, with a special emphasis on Alzheimer’s disease and cancer.

The discussions highlighted news both good and bad. The outlook on Alzheimer’s disease, which currently affects more than 100 million people and likely will double in 20 years, was quite sobering and punctuated by a simple statement given by Robert J. Egge, vice president of public policy and advocacy for the Alzheimer’s Association: Unlike other leading killers like cancer and heart disease, no one has met an “Alzheimer’s survivor.”

However, this does not mean things cannot improve if the U.S. develops a strategic plan, such as it did for HIV/AIDS. In just a little over a generation, AIDS went from being a terminal disease to a manageable one. And, considering there are plenty of scientists taking up the cause, like American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology member and “Rock Doc” Samuel E. Gandy of the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, hope for Alzheimer’s disease may be on the horizon.

But, as Collins noted in his remarks at the briefing, it will take more than just support. In our aging society, chronic, debilitating diseases like Alzheimer’s and cancer continue to rise in incidence and create an ever-increasing burden on patients, their families and caregivers. Easing this burden will require new and innovative research models that can effectively tackle these complex disorders. And that task falls on the shoulders of our dedicated scientists, who too often toil in obscurity. Considering the importance of their work, they should be treated like rock stars, and, thanks to the efforts of groups like Geoffrey Beene Gives Back®, they just might be.

*For a recap of the briefing, go to <http://bit.ly/LW8RX>.*

*To learn more about the Rock Stars of Science, go to [www.rockstarsofscience.org](http://www.rockstarsofscience.org).*

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