

# Other Than Editing

by Diego Pineda

## Barry Kramer: An Editor with Great Pens

Barry (Barnett) Kramer makes his editing marks with style. Editor-in-chief of the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute (JNCI)* and director of the Office of Disease Prevention at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Kramer is an avid pen collector with superb handwriting.

“Many people will say”, Kramer says, “when they see my writing and find out that I am a physician, ‘this just can’t be’, because they have never seen physicians who write legibly.” He says he didn’t have perfect handwriting as a child, but in later years he got interested in calligraphy and bought some books on specific styles of handwriting, finally improving his handwriting.

Kramer’s calligraphy and penmanship are closely related to his fascination for fountain pens. Since third grade, when he received his first Esterbrook fountain pen, Kramer has been collecting them. “I particularly like fountain pens”, he says, “but for years I have also collected advertisement ballpoint pens—for restaurants, or gasoline stations, or opening of stores. When I was in junior high school, my father gave me a Parker 21 fountain pen, and when I got my first real paid job, I was able to afford a fountain pen with a gold nib.”

Kramer says each fountain pen has its unique personality; each writes differently. He always has three fountain pens in his pocket, each one with a different color of ink: blue, black, and green. “Friendly blue for accepting manuscripts, black for rejecting manuscripts, and green for the day-to-day editing”, he says, “but it is a distinctive green so I know it was I who edited the manuscript. That has been sort of a trademark, to use green for manuscript editing.”

The green-ink trademark revealed his identity when he was editing a book manuscript on a flight to a meeting of the American Society for Clinical Oncology. “I was on the plane, making edits”, Kramer says, “and the person sitting right across the aisle from me said, ‘Are you Barry Kramer?’—I never met the person—and I said ‘Yes, how do you know?’ And he said, ‘Well, because I am one of the authors of the book you are editing and I got back your edits a few weeks ago, and they were

in green. I’ve never seen anyone editing in green, and then I saw you there editing a manuscript in green, and I wondered if it was you.”

Besides the three in his pocket, Kramer has about 40 costly limited-edition fountain pens and also 150 less-expensive fountain pens. He keeps some of them in a safe and some in a display case. “My father was a very handy woodworker”, he says. “His hobby was woodwork, so when he was alive he built me a display case with a glass top, and I keep a number of pens there. The case itself is one of my most treasured possessions.”

Kramer has to keep up also with his various positions as an editor, physician, and researcher. In addition to being editor-in-chief of the *JNCI*, Kramer is editor-in-chief of the *PDQ (Physician Data Query) of Cancer Screening and Prevention*, an online database that weighs evidence on cancer screening tests and in primary cancer prevention. “My personal research is in cancer screening, which I still conduct in cooperation with the staff of the NCI”, Kramer says. As well as being director of the NIH Office of Disease Prevention, he directs the Office of Medical Applications of Research within that office.

Despite his busy career, Kramer finds ways to enjoy fountain pens, going to lunch a couple of times a week at the mall so he can stop by the pen shop. One Christmas season, he even worked there during the weekends. “I volunteered a few times [to work at a pen shop]”, he says, “but for one season, I worked in a pen shop as a salesperson, and that was a lot of fun. I was at an advantage knowing a lot about fountain pens, but I didn’t know nearly so much about ballpoint pens. I had to learn a lot on the job about the different ballpoint pens.”

Kramer knows not only about pens but also about pen history. A conversation with him can range from the interesting facts and anecdotes of the invention of writing instruments to the technicalities



**Barry Kramer**

of pen manufacturing and the “personality of fountain pens”. “The heart of the pen is the nib”, Kramer says. “Every nib is hand-ground and hand-tipped with iridium or another very hard metal, such as rhodium, to keep the midpoint from wearing down. Since it requires such intricate hand work, every nib has its own personality; and you can tell, generally, which nib is going to be a supreme writer and which nib is going to be scratchy or a troublemaker or very hard to break in.”

Kramer’s broad knowledge of pens reflects one facet of his personality: his passion for learning. Susan Rossi, deputy director of the Office of Medical Applications of Research, who works with him, says, “Whenever Barry decides to become knowledgeable about a topic, whether statistics or fountain pens, you can count on him to dive into the subject with great energy and a willingness to roll up his sleeves and work hard at understanding the topic inside and out.”

Rossi says that, as a researcher, Kramer is very clear about the fundamental principles of good science and adheres to them with great conviction. “This attribute comes in handy for his editorial responsibilities as well”, she says.

As might be expected, Kramer rarely edits on the computer. “I am really a paper editing person”, he says. “At the journal, I do it

all on paper; so 99.9% of all the editing I do is with a fountain pen.”

In his large collection of fountain pens, Kramer has some favorites that he uses frequently. “I basically have six pens that I really, really like a lot, and I go again and again back to them”, he says. Fountain pens appeal to him in various ways, but he particularly assesses the quality of the nib, the smoothness of its writing, the flow of the ink, the pen’s beauty, and its balance in his hand.

More than ink, Kramer’s pens carry a deeper meaning. “All [my pens] have a provenance”, he says. “You know why you bought the pen or when you bought it; if it was handed down to you, you remember how you acquired it, who must have been writing with it. Even if you buy a used pen at a pen show, you can imagine who might have been writing with it and what they might have written, well before your lifetime. So there is an emotion that is tied up in the pens. I treasure those that people would dig through their drawers to find and then say, ‘You know, my grandfather had this pen, now it is yours.’ So it is an emotional treasure.”

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