Ray Gambino opened the front door of his Boca Raton, FL home to find me standing on his doorstep. Because an MLO reader once likened my editorial commentaries to Dr. Gambino’s style from years past, I was quaking in my boots. Once inside the house, I was guided by him to my favorite room in any home, the kitchen. His lovely wife later came to meet me, and the two of them made me feel completely at ease.

Having heard various stories about Dr. Gambino — all of them kind — I was delighted to finally be in the presence of the man who, I was told, “invented” MLO. Dr. Gambino and I had prepared for an MLO interview; but instead, I became totally captivated by the yarns he spun over the next couple of hours. In the end, I found that MLO had quite a “genealogy” and the gist of the story is this.

The seed is planted

In 1968, Medical Economics in Oradell, NJ, had the largest controlled circulation for its medical journals in the world. Frank Nixon, publisher of its Physicians Desk Reference, and Edward Friedman (who became MLO’s first editor) were on a mission. To expand Medical Economics’ publishing empire, the company wanted to develop another medically oriented magazine. In their quest, the two men traversed America, speaking to medical experts of all types. They later claimed that in nearly every case, they were told: “Go see Ray Gambino.”

Dr. Gambino laughs, “I was the laboratory director of Englewood Hospital’s Pathology Department in Bergen County” … the very same county Nixon and Friedman recently had left behind. As a member of the American Society for Clinical Pathologists’ education programs, Gambino ran a yearly seminar at Englewood to teach pathologists how to manage a laboratory. He also trained residents from Columbia Presbyterian Hospital across the river in New York for one or two years to round out their training in pathology with a focus in laboratory medicine. It was at Englewood that Nixon and Friedman arrived to pick Dr. Gambino’s brain for new ideas for a magazine.

“It was pretty obvious to me that there was one of two things they could do. One was to make a magazine like Scientific American, glossy but scientific, or to make a magazine like Medical Economics but for the laboratory technologists. Nobody spoke for the lab techs in those days except to refer to them as “my girls.””

Gambino explained to Nixon and Friedman that there was quite a “unmet need.” The societies catered to the pathologists. Now, a forum existed for the personnel — and personal — issues that they confronted. It was that simple.

By Carren Bersch, Editor

The man who invented MLO

A walk down memory lane with Ray Gambino, MD

The idea sprouts and flourishes

Not long after this visit, Gambino left Englewood to be a full professor of pathology with tenure at Columbia University Medical School. Concurrently, he became senior editor for the new Medical Economics publication, Medical Laboratory Observer. His prior journalistic experience was a co-op job in college for The Cleveland Plain Dealer for a few months.

Gambino began writing a “Viewpoint” commentary and answering readers’ questions in “Tips on Technology” (now entitled “Tips from the clinical experts” by Daniel M. Baer, MD). At this point in our meeting, he shuffled through MLO memorabilia to find for me a New York Times Op-Ed from March 20, 1976, entitled “My Three Errors,” which had originally appeared as his MLO “Viewpoint.” This illustrates the lofty goals achieved by the MLO team.

“My intuition,” says Gambino, “had told me there was this unmet need. The societies catered to the pathologists. Now, MLO was the only vehicle that spoke the same language as the lab techs.” With its inception, a forum existed for the personnel — and personal — issues that they confronted. It was that simple.

In 1977, key players at MLO struck out on their own, convincing Gambino to follow. Lab 78 and Lab 79, sponsored by one of the professional organizations, not only had high readership but also high financial shortfalls. For several years, Gambino fulfilled his subscribers’ needs with a newsletter called Lab Report for Physicians. Medical Economics published MLO until its sale to Nelson Publishing in 2000. None of that interfered with Dr. Gambino’s contributions to the magazine, however. His last gig was as recent as last November when he collaborated with other authors on an article investigating elevated potassium levels.

Charmed life for charming doctor

After three years of Florida living, Gambino muses about his fascinating past, “Two of my Englewood Hospital residents went on to found what is now LabCorp — James Powell — and MedPath — Paul Brown, the most entreprenuerial physician I have ever known. He is the only person who could sell me the Brooklyn Bridge.”
Dr. Gambino misses the intellectual stimulation of New York. “Since I am at the end of my career, the Internet suffices.” The Internet brought him news of one of his 1970s Columbia residents, Richard Axel, who won the 2004 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine “for figuring out the genes that make our olfactory sense work. He is brilliant,” says Gambino. “I have known four Nobel Prize winners. One was my chief at Bellvue Hospital, Dickinson Woodruff Richards, Jr., who, with his colleague, Andre F. Cournard, won in 1956 for cardio-pulmonary physiology; the other was a resident there, Baruch S. Blumberg who won in 1976 [with D. Carleton Gajdusek] by discovering that Australia antigen led to hepatitis B infection.”

Always thinking outside the box

“I am not your usual pathologist,” says Gambino, who began his education at the age of 16 at Antioch in Yellow Springs, OH — “a fabulously stimulating place.” His schoolteacher parents allowed him to attend the institution that he says, “was the radical home of communism, social equality, and free love. I often joke that I found the communism and the social equality, but never the free love.” After two years, he was drafted during WWII to serve in the U.S. Navy where he pursued electronics.

“While I was in training, the atom bomb was dropped; I said to myself, ‘Do I want to be in a field that does this kind of stuff?’ I then decided upon medicine.” Although he could have attended Harvard, Gambino chose the University of Rochester where he believed he would have more access to his professors. His medical career took him to the Mayo Clinic, Bellevue Hospital, St. Luke’s Roosevelt, and several other well-known institutions.

When he became involved with the laboratory at Bellevue, he says, “I had an epiphany as an intern one day. The labs were awful — unbelievably bad — and were considered by internists to be of no use whatsoever. With my scientific background, I knew that good lab tests were often better than the doctor. I intuitively knew that we could make better tests because of my experience there with the catherization procedures that had taught us more about the body.

“Nobody was doing lab testing very well. One day, a patient died because the lab had said his potassium was low when it was really high. I said, ‘This is nuts. I can fix this,’ and decided I would become a lab director.” Gambino then returned to Columbia to become a laboratory technologist. “Lab director was my goal. Within two years, I had an opportunity in Milwaukee at St. Luke’s; so I went — my ‘Siberian tour of duty’ — and I ran the chemistry lab.”

After six Siberian winters, Gambino returned to the New York area, taking that lab director job at Englewood Hospital where our story began. “I told the lab techs there that no doctor has a right to order any test he wants, but every doctor has the absolute right to ask for and receive help on any problem 24/7. Tell me the problem; let the lab decide what tests to do.”

Strong beliefs and faith in the future

What does Gambino think about the future of the clinical laboratory? “The lab will not go away. It is impossible that the lab will go away. You cannot think about disease diagnosis, treatment, and monitoring without using lab tests. I liken lab tests to navigational aids: They help the patient and the doctor take a safe diagnostic, therapeutic, or preventive journey, so that you both know where you are, whether you have lost your way, or if you are making the progress you expect.” He believes that there is still widespread misunderstanding of lab tests, that doctors order too many, and he thinks that consumers will drive much of the laboratory business in the future.

What does Dr. Gambino think about young people who are entering the laboratory profession? “As I recounted earlier, I have known four Nobel Prize winners personally. Not one of them said, ‘I am going to get the Nobel Prize. Here is my plan.’ No, they were curious people — bright — and they stuck to something they were interested in, although the end result was not necessarily what they had in mind at the outset. That is how you succeed.”

From all of us at MLO and 38 years’ worth of devoted readers, thanks, Ray Gambino, for sticking with something you were interested in, although the end result was not necessarily what you had in mind at the outset. □