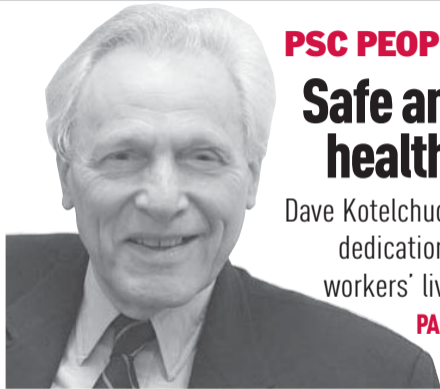


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PSC PEOPLE

Safe and healthy

Dave Kotelchuck's dedication to workers' lives.

PAGE 4

Dave Kotelchuck applies science

By PAT ARNOW

During the civil rights movement of the 1960s Dave Kotelchuck said, "I felt like I was leading two lives." As a physicist at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee, he studied sigma particles in the quiet of his lab. Then during his evenings and weekends as a political activist, he recalled, "all hell broke loose."

"I began to look for ways to lead one life. And leading one life to me meant looking for more applied areas of science," Kotelchuck told *Clarion*. "I wanted to do work that I knew would help people directly. For me personally, it was no longer enough that it just be interesting or that it might possibly help someone someday in the future."

HIGHEST AWARD

After much searching, he found his path in the emerging field of occupational safety and health – and last fall Dave Kotelchuck received one of his colleagues' highest honors, the Alice Hamilton Award. Named after a pioneer of workplace health and safety during the New Deal, the prize is given by the American Public Health Association's (APHA) occupational health section for exceptional achievement over the course of an entire career.

"He's an extremely forceful, articulate person you've got to take seriously, but he doesn't take up a lot of space in the room," said Joel Shufro of the New York Coalition for Occupational Safety & Health (NYCOSH). "He's not out there tooting his own horn." Indeed, a reporter may find that it takes some prodding to get Kotelchuck to talk about his accomplishments. "It feels like bragging," he complained.

HANDS ON

Today a professor emeritus at the Hunter School of Public Health, Kotelchuck remains professionally active. His drive to connect scientific knowledge with its practical application can be seen in the relationships he's built over the course of his career, working with academics and activists alike. "Dave brings together the academic world, the APHA and the union world," noted Shufro.

Kotelchuck's journey into and out of physics was shaped by his personal history. "I grew up in Jim-Crow Baltimore," he said in his speech accepting the APHA award. "I never had the opportunity – from K through 12 – to go to school with an African-American or Caribbean-American student."

In college at Johns Hopkins, he became friends with a black student, Tony Adona. "In those pinched, oppressive times," he recalled, "when we wanted to go on a double date together we had to travel with our friends an hour or more to Washington, DC, simply to sit down in a theater of our choice and have a meal together at a restaurant."

But together with hundreds

Professor honored for health & safety work



Hunter professor emeritus Dave Kotelchuck was honored by the American Public Health Association in 2008.

of other students both black and white, they organized protests that integrated a shopping center and movie theater near Morgan State University in Baltimore. "Those were life-shaping experiences," he told *Clarion*. "You learn that if people fight back, sometimes they can win."

"These injustices burned deeply," he said in his acceptance speech – and they still do. "Tony was a community organizer and directed a voter registration campaign," Kotelchuck said. "He died before he was 30 from an asthma attack – and here I am at 70 years plus talking about him. Talk about public health disparities!"

Kotelchuck's career was also shaped by his parents' beliefs and the price they paid for holding them. "My parents were McCarthy victims," he told his APHA colleagues. "Growing up after WWII in the time of Cold War with the Soviet Union, I saw my father, a leftist and dedicated patriot, unjustly fired from his government job."

"My father had been a physicist, and I grew up in a home where there was an interest in math and science," he told *Clarion*. The main reason he chose to major in physics was that he enjoyed it – but it did offer another prospect: "I remember my father saying that you can study in some of the social sciences, but it would be hard to hold a position because the universities were getting purged, particularly in the social sciences."

After earning a PhD in physics, Kotelchuck began working at Vanderbilt in the early 1960s. At the same time, he was active in the civil rights movement through the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), whose local leader was John Lewis, now a

member of Congress. At one SNCC demonstration, Kotelchuck took a punch from an outraged segregationist – and a photo of the incident appeared in newspapers around the country. Concerned that this might put his job in jeopardy, a group of faculty defended Kotelchuck's right to protest and warned the administration against any punitive action. "The Vanderbilt faculty were very solid," said Kotelchuck. "I had done this on my own time, and in the end I was not punished for my activities."

His convictions did become the source of another conflict with his job, however – an internal one. On principle, Kotelchuck did not apply for military research grants. Still, "in a number of cases I was training people to do work I would not do myself," he said. "That seemed to me to be a contradiction."

Eventually he felt compelled to make a career change and left his tenure-track job at Vanderbilt for a postdoctoral fellowship at Cornell in physical biochemistry. There, he thought, medical science research that helped people might put an end to his sense of a "double life."

NEXT CAREER

In researching the folding of proteins, Kotelchuck at one point asked the head of his lab group which of several proteins he should focus on. "Oh, any one of them," was the response. Kotelchuck persisted, wondering if one or two might not be more relevant to human health. "When I was told again that it didn't matter," Kotelchuck said, "I began to wonder. They wanted me for the high-powered mathematics, but I started to think this was not for me."

Kotelchuck moved on to a research faculty position at Mount

Sinai School of Medicine to study cystic fibrosis. And it was at Mt. Sinai that he found his next career – not in the lab, but at a local meeting of the Medical Committee for Human Rights. Tony Mazzocchi from the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union (OCAW), a father of the modern health and safety movement, spoke and appealed for volunteers to teach a safety course to OCAW members in New Jersey.

"We didn't know very much about health and safety. This was a new field to us," Kotelchuck said. "From working in physics, I knew about radiation badges...but I never gave any thought previously to the persons putting the chemicals in the bottles I was using in the lab." He studied up over the summer of 1974 and worked with Dr. Jeanne Stellman to design a course, translating technical language into more accessible terms. That fall they taught union members in a class at Rutgers – one of the first such courses after World War II designed to train workers in health and safety.

"I learned how little these workers knew about the dangers they faced," Kotelchuck said. "Even with my limited knowledge, here was something I could offer." That conclusion led him to become a student again. "I mean, I had a PhD in physics, but for teaching occupational health...it didn't altogether qualify me."

After earning a masters' degree in public health at Harvard, Kotelchuck was hired as research director of occupational safety and health programs at the United Electrical Workers (UE). Here he found the direct application of science to people's lives that he had been searching for.

When Kotelchuck accepted the Alice Hamilton award, he recalled a particularly satisfying example. A UE member at the GE plant in Allentown, Pennsylvania, had returned to work after suffering a heart attack and was assigned to operate a large degreasing tank, filled with the solvent trichloroethylene (TCE). When the worker refused and requested transfer to a safer job, he was sent home without pay – as were three others who supported his stand.

ACADEMIA

At the subsequent grievance hearing, "the man with the heart attack was asked by GE's counsel why he had refused to work at the degreaser," Kotelchuck said. "From his vest pocket he pulled out a copy of the health and safety column on solvents which I had written for *UE News*. He said that the union had warned him that TCE solvent vapors could on occasion cause cardiac arrhythmias and even death." Supported by Kotelchuck's testimony, the four workers all won back pay and the heart attack survivor won a transfer to another position.

Kotelchuck rejoined academia in 1984 at Hunter, as director of the Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences Program. It is one of the foremost programs in the country and trains many of the students of color who work in this profession in the US. "If you go around New York City and encounter health and safety people, there is a strong possibility you will meet a graduate of our program," Kotelchuck said.

Even as he oversaw and strengthened Hunter's graduate program, Kotelchuck continued his hands-on activism. He wrote a column for the UE for some 25 years. He joined APHA committees and has served on the NYCOSH board since 1985-

STILL UNION

Kotelchuck also became a health and safety activist in his own union, the PSC, where he is still a co-chair of the union's Health and Safety Watchdogs. The committee has tackled problems from mold at the College of Staten Island to air quality at BMCC after 9/11. "Dave does not give up," said fellow co-chair Joan Greenbaum. "His energy and strength are at the heart of just about everything the union does with occupational health and safety – from the big issues like 9/11 dust, to details about a sample from a filter in someone's office."

Kotelchuck's quiet persistence in the effort to secure treatment and compensation for workers affected by 9/11 dust is cited by Shufro of NYCOSH, one of the people who nominated Kotelchuck for the Alice Hamilton Award. "Many people are ready to walk away from this tragedy, but he has constantly stuck to the fact that hundreds of workers are ill," said Shufro. "He never gives up, never backs off – and has never gotten the recognition he deserves." With the Hamilton Award, that last point has begun to change.