

PROFILE

LARRY J. GORDON, M.S., M.P.H.

There have been a lot of changes in public health since Larry Gordon applied for a job as a sanitarian back in 1950. Many of them Mr. Gordon himself engineered in New Mexico, particularly in Albuquerque which under his direction grew to be a model of environmental services. Nationally Larry has become something of a prophet of change - a voice in the environmental wilderness challenging the health professions to even greater change if they are to help man cope with the ever-increasing insults to his physical, mental and social well-being.

But in 1950 the young high school science teacher with a Master's degree in ecology had not the faintest idea what a sanitarian was when he applied for the job. No fault of his. Ecology and public health had not yet been wed, at least not in the minds of the practitioners: "When I mentioned the degree to the State Health Officer, he looked at me rather scornfully and said in effect, "Son, we need to get you off to school."

And off to school Larry eventually went, to the University of Michigan where, in 1954, he won his Master's in Public Health. Until then the young county, then district, finally State sanitarian was considered something of an anomaly, an outsider: an ecologist in public health. Imagine!

Once he had his M.P.H.; however, Larry was one of the fraternity and in 1955 Albuquerque claimed him for its own. He joined the City health department as chief sanitarian. "Sanitary Inspector" was the sign over the door and, indeed, the Albuquerque health department was not a health department at all. Personal health was the preserve of the County Health Department. The City department, which wasn't even listed in the telephone directory, was a loose-knit organization that dabbled in things environmental - mostly food, milk and meat inspections.

When Larry became director of the department he began to introduce Albuquerque to the wider range of community programs - air pollution, industrial hygiene, rad health, housing, swimming pools, pure food control, vector control, a variety of training courses and eventually the more sophisticated programs of urban renewal and Model Cities.

By 1965 the Albuquerque department had responsibility for all environmental health programs in both the city and county and had become in fact, and in name, the first and only Department of Environmental Health in the nation. Three times in the span of six years (1959, 1961 and 1964) Albuquerque walked off with the Samuel J. Crumbine award, a national award for outstanding achievement in environmental health and food and beverage sanitation.

In the wake of the Department's progress came personal kudos to its director: In 1961 the National Association of Sanitarians presented Larry with the Walter Mangold Award, for "Meritorious contributions to Sanitation and Public Health." In 1962, the American Public Health Association (Western Branch) awarded him the John J. Sippy Memorial Award. That same year he received the International Association of Milk and Food Sanitarians' Distinguished Service Award for "Service to the Community in the Field of Public Health ... for Outstanding Accomplishments in Both Public and Industry Relations."

Perhaps what accounts in part for Larry's crusading spirit vis-à-vis the environment is his love for the outdoors and the peace and pleasure nature intends man to enjoy. The mountain lakes and streams are his favorite haunts during the fishing season, and as his brother Ladd is Director of the State Game Department, Larry has the inside track on where they are biting. In the fall his passion is hunting quail. New Mexico, with its large quail population (a 20 per-day limit), is a mecca for quail hunters if they are sturdy enough to stalk the Southwestern species.

"They're runners," Larry explains "and you have to be willing to take off and run across the hills after them, stopping every hundred yards or so to get off a shot and then run some more. It's a good way to either keep in shape . . . or perish."

Larry is in good shape. He stands six feet tall and weighs in at 170 pounds notwithstanding his relish for plump quail the way his wife, Nedra, prepares them. Larry and Nedra Callender were students together in the University of New Mexico. They were married shortly after Larry started in on his career as a sanitarian. The Gordons have three children: Debra, 17, Kent, 15, and Gary, 7. The youngsters have introduced their parents to the more mobile

enjoyments of the outdoors, such as water skiing and snow mobiling

The Gordon home in Albuquerque stands out among its neighbors for the flat-roofed, Southwestern style and the substantial pigeon loft in the backyard. Nedra, a third generation New Mexican, is responsible for the house, her own design, while the boys are responsible for the loft of 50 racing pigeons.

In the 6 months since Larry has been commuting to his new job as Director of Environmental Services for the New Mexico Health and Social Services Dept. in Santa Fe, the Gordon pigeons have flown off with all the laurels of the 100 to 500 mile races in which they've been entered.

Every morning Kent and Gary load their best birds into the family VW and, to an accompaniment of coos from the back seat, Larry drives the sixty miles to Santa Fe where he releases the birds for their daily commute back to Albuquerque.

Larry is happy with his new job. Environmental concerns are being given their due in New Mexico's forward looking Department of Health and Social Services. The Department's environmental services and medical services are separate but equal divisions, each with its own director and with a program coordinator over all.

"I think this type of thing is the only way that we are going to give environmental services the visibility, the emphasis, the status and the prestige to keep these services from further fragmenting out of health agencies," says Larry. "In New Mexico we're thinking in terms of environmental services, not just environmental health: The concept being that we are obligated in this day and age to give service: in total environmental management where there is a health aspect of any significance. Our program guides are being changed to show not only goals of public health, but also safety, comfort, and economic and social well being: a broadening of the environmental service program into the area of social services..."

Gordon the prophet talking; articulating his vision of environmental management in its' fullest sense as the key to America's future health and well being. We can only hope that the health establishment will come to cherish the same vision ... soon.

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