

LEADERS IN ENVIRONMENTAL Journal of Environmental Health

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Larry Gordon, M.P.H., M.S.

The name Larry Gordon was often the first one on people's lips when *JEH* asked members of the profession whom they saw as leaders. Again and again, respondents cited the prestige of his accomplishments---a point that seemed especially important to members of a profession whose greatest strength generally is not self-promotion.

Gordon, one might say, is the celebrity personality of environmental health.

Here is an environmental health professional who has been president of the American Public Health Association (1980-1981); who testified before the Presidential Committee on Executive Reorganization about the creation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; who has several times testified before Congress; who has won numerous awards, including the Snyder Award and the Mangold Award; and who has more than 240 publications to his name. He founded the New Mexico Scientific Laboratory System in 1973 and the New Mexico Environmental Improvement Agency (now the New Mexico Department of the Environment) in 1971, as well as the Albuquerque-Bernalillo County Environmental Health department in 1957---to name just a few highlights from a 56-year career.

Several respondents to the *JEH* survey cited Gordon as the only nationally recognized "public intellectual" the profession has.

And what is a "public intellectual?" For environmental health practitioners, the term seems to mean someone "who is thinking several years out," someone with "predictive abilities," and above all someone who is willing to challenge basic assumptions of the profession. Often respondents said that they disagreed with some of Gordon's positions but still found that, as one put it, "every time I read something he writes, it changes the way I look at the issue forever."

An example of the way he challenges assumptions might be Gordon's response to a question *JEH* asked of all the leaders interviewed for this article: "Where do you see the profession heading from here?":

"The field of environmental health and protection is not a profession, and it is misleading to continue the pretense. It is an effort engaged in by a varied assortment of disciplines and professions within a broad array of organizations. The field of environmental health and protection is profoundly multidisciplinary as well as interdisciplinary. Environmental health and protection practitioners may be classified as either environmental health or protection professionals [i.e., if they have been educated in "environmental health" or "environmental protection" per se] or professionals in environmental health and protection [if they have been educated in some other discipline such as chemistry or biology]. Environmental health and protection is a field in which to practice one's profession."

He sees opportunities for people to practice in this field "not only at local health departments, but also at state environmental protection agencies, pollution control departments, the federal Department of Energy the Department of Defense, and the Indian Health Service, as well as local planning agencies." The key is to embrace the whole field of practice regardless of "organizational and mental barriers" and be willing to move around among agencies."

A too-narrow focus has gotten environmental health in trouble before, he pointed out. By lagging behind public consciousness, the field runs the risk of making itself irrelevant:

"The public and public policy leaders know that pollution kills fish, limits visibility, creates foul stench, ruins lakes and rivers, degrades recreational areas, and endangers plant and animal life. Environmental health practitioners must develop the capacity to embrace ecological issues as precursors to health problems.... Failure to embrace ecological components has been among the reasons many environmental health responsibilities have been assigned to agencies other than health departments."

There is an ominous allusion in this analysis to the period of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the reluctance of public health agencies to deal with issues of pollution then the most prominent threats to human health, led to the loss of those responsibilities and the formation of environmental protection agencies in which human health concerns were not the primary mandate. Many in environmental health consider this development to have been detrimental not just to health departments but to the interest public health itself.

Gordon sees a similar drama unfolding the present:

"Except for the voices of a few leaders environmental health input is noticeably absent in the current debates over such global issues as ozone depletion, global warming, population pressures, global toxification, desertification, and deforestation, all of which pose threats to human health and world ecology. Environmental health leaders need to be prepared to be constructively involved in the planning to counter such global threats to our delicate ecological system."

"Many environmental health practitioners," he added, "need to lift themselves out of their conventional mindsets. They are available, they want to serve, but they do not have clear concepts of ensuring accomplishment and recognition."

By way of example, he cited the problem of global warming. In July of 2005, he said, He posted a message on the Web site of the National Conference of Local Environmental Health Administrators, in which he pointed out that a report from 1992 on the future of environmental health had identified global warming as an environmental health problem. He proposed that NCLEHA appoint a global-warming committee and develop a guide that would spell out actions that could be taken on the local level with respect to global-warming prevention. Perhaps NCLEHA could even approach the National Center for Environmental Health and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for funding to help with this project.

"Okay;" he told JEH. "That was July 24, 2005. Guess how many answers I got. Zero." Gordon acknowledged that he did not seriously believe NCEH or U.S. EPA would fund such a project. But, he said, he did think it probable that "if five or six of the younger, more scientifically oriented, up-to-date members could get together, they could come up with some good ideas."

It's worth pausing here to note that many of the environmental health practitioners JEH interviewed for this series did mention global warming as an issue they were concerned about. But they lacked the time, the resources, and the regulatory authority to address it.

When JEH asked Gordon about this dilemma, his response was swift:

"They say they don't have the right regulatory platform. Of course they don't! It needs to be developed. That's called leadership."

That means, above all, working with law makers to get the platform:

"Nobody was asking for a New Mexico Air Quality Act. I wanted it. No one was asking for a New Mexico Environmental Improvement Agency. I wanted it. No one was asking for the New Mexico Scientific Laboratory System. I wanted it.... All these various laws that I've gotten passed---the New Mexico Water Quality Act, the Air Quality Act, the New Mexico Occupational Safety and Health Act."

The creation of all these "regulatory platforms" involved persuading political officials. It involved "drafting, promoting, and testifying." Or, as Gordon put it, "I never took polls.... A lot of these steps were very controversial.... There was no public sentiment regarding these innovations. You just do these things and hope for public and political support."

This is risk taking of the most basic sort. Gordon added, "I lost a lot of [battles] too! I had some awfully good ideas that never went anywhere."

A risk is only truly a risk when there's no guarantee of recognition and success. Perhaps the most courageous aspect of Gordon's leadership has been a willingness to undertake projects under these circumstances.