I want to thank all the environmental health professionals who were the unsung heroes of the COVID-19 pandemic. Environmental health professionals stepped up to the plate and performed a variety of tasks that provided their peers and the public with important insight into the value of our profession. I would be remiss to not thank all of the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) staff for their hard work. NEHA is lucky to have such a passionate, dedicated, and hardworking staff.

I grew up in Lackawanna, New York, a steel town located in a suburb of Buffalo. At its height of operation, the Bethlehem Steel Plant, known locally as Daddy Bethlehem, was the world's largest steel factory that employed over 20,000 workers. Growing up in a steel town was a wonderful experience with people from all over the world having a shared sense of community.

As I got older, I realized I grew up in a polluted town. I remember as a kid my grandmothers taking clothes off the line so the clothes would not get covered in coal dust when the coke ovens would have their shake out. As a child I would walk along the appropriately named Smokes Creek and helped clean debris out to the creek as a Boy Scout.

I learned firsthand the danger of heavy manufacturing. When I was little, my father received third degree burns on his lower leg. Two of my friends, Michael “Mugsy” Francis Catuzza and Kenneth Pirovski, lost their lives in occupational accidents, which taught me that the true value of environmental and occupational health and safety (EOHS) can never be measured in dollars. My father was a third-generation steel worker and if Bethlehem Steel did not close down in the 1980s, I probably would have been the fourth generation. Later in his career, my father was the union representative who assisted with health and safety at Bethlehem Steel, which helped guide my career.

I went to the University of Buffalo, studying premed with the hopes of becoming a veterinarian. Unfortunately, I am allergic to animals and needed to make a career switch. I switched to environmental studies under the assumption I would spend most of my time in nature counting deer. Instead, I was conducting sewer monitoring watching the feces (aka brown trout) float by. My first job after graduation was in a laboratory, which I did not enjoy. No one informed me that the professions in the environmental field making money were engineering or EOHS, a lesson I learned the hard way.

My father told me to look into health and safety. In his infinite wisdom, he stated that people will pay more to save themselves than whales. The only EOHS program in New York at the time was at Hunter College in New York City. I called the EOHS Department at Hunter College to learn more. I ended up speaking with Dr. David Koteltchuck, program director, who spent over one hour enlightening me about this amazing field. Majoring in EOHS was wonderful—I loved my classes that were taught by professors who had practiced in the field for years before coming into academia. My professors at Hunter College are my inspiration through their love teaching and their genuine concern for the success of their students. I did an internship at an EOHS consulting firm in Buffalo and realized that I had found a home. After graduating, I worked for consulting firms and in the chemical industry. The work was fulfilling but my passion was teaching. Something my grandfather Eli Evanovich, who only finished third grade in Macedonia, resonated with me: “Education is something that can never be taken away from you.”

In order to teach EOHS, I knew I had to go back to school to obtain a terminal degree, which led me to the University of Alabama at Birmingham. I have many people to thank who helped me complete my doctor of public health (DrPH) that afforded me a wonderful, fulfilling career, including Dr. Mitchell Zavon and Dr. R. Kent Oestenstad (aka Dr O). There are not enough words to thank my wife Deby, who has been a stalwart in support of my career, dreams, and aspirations, as well as our eventual move to Kentucky.

I started a consulting firm in Buffalo while completing my doctoral research. It was there that I began my journey as a Hawaiian shirt, sneaker wearing fashionista. I hit the lottery when I became a faculty member of the Environmental Health Science Program at Eastern Kentucky University, being mentored by Dr.
Peter (aka “Yoda the Industrial Hygiene Master”) Creighton, Dr. Carolyn Harvey, Professor Worley Johnson, Professor Joe Beck, and the other faculty. I started as the baby of the program but after 21 years, I am now the old man. Funny how that happens.

I have found a home in Jamaica teaching with Dr. Norbert Campbell and Dr. Henroy Scarlett in the Occupational and Environmental Safety and Health Department at the University of the West Indies at Mona, Jamaica, along with being a member of the Jamaica Association of Public Health Inspectors for the past 17 years. When not teaching, I consult for government and private entities.

Environmental health is a hidden treasure, providing a world of opportunity that touches all aspects of daily life. In my opinion, one of the greatest challenges we face is a lack of knowledge by the public of our profession. I will be working with NEHA members and staff to increase the visibility of the environmental health profession. Along with the general public, we need to diligently educate the numerous professionals we work with that environmental health is public health.

This increased awareness will also help to reverse the trend of fewer students pursuing a formal education in environmental health. Students are the future of environmental health; therefore, we need to not only increase the number of the younger generation but also get them more involved in NEHA. As a profession, we all need to work together to spread the word far and wide about this exciting, fulfilling, and meaningful career. I believe an increased awareness will also lead to increased diversity in our field, an area that needs improvement.

As the world is reopening from the COVID-19 pandemic, environmental health needs to seize the opportunity to educate the public, policy makers, and key stakeholders of the technical, scientific expertise required to become a Registered Environmental Health Specialist/Registered Sanitarian (REHS/RS). The REHS/RS credential is under appreciated by many, something I will work diligently to rectify. Another priority for myself and the NEHA Board of Directors and staff is to make NEHA more beneficial to our affiliates.

I have a passion for assisting people all over the world to have clean air, food, and water, along with a healthy and safe place to live, work, and play. I believe NEHA can help increase international participation and in turn, we can all learn from each other to help improve environmental health and the overall quality of life on a global scale. We are a cure to many of the world’s ills. Environmental health professionals realize this fact but we need everyone else to know it. We are making progress as an association and I hope to help us make even more progress.

This moment is our time to help spread the word—environmental health is public health. Our communities, here and worldwide, need us as environmental health leaders to be bold.

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