

Observatory News Fall 2002

Convocation Speech by John L. Henshaw
Assistant Secretary of Labor for Occupational Safety and Health
Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)
For the School of Public Health at the University of Michigan
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Thank you. Thank you very much, Noreen.

Congratulations, University of Michigan School of Public Health graduating students! I was deeply honored to receive Dean Clark's invitation to join your celebration and address the class of 2002! Thank you, Noreen, for the invitation and that generous introduction.

What a privilege to be with all of you—Dean Clark; Associate Deans Jeff Alexander, Bob Gray, and Cathleen Cornell; Associate Vice President Hank Baer; CEO of Association of Schools of Public Health, Harrison Spencer; faculty; graduating students; family and friends.

When I received my U of M School of Public Health master's degree in 1974, I never pictured myself being a part of a graduation ceremony in this way. But I am delighted to be here tonight to applaud you on your academic achievement and challenge you as you begin your careers as public health and environmental safety and health professionals.

Tonight, many of you leave the academic world behind to join the professional world. You are taking on the challenge of making the world a better place—guarding the public health, delivering better care, improving the environment, and protecting workers on the job.

Chinese philosopher Confucius said, "Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life." I trust you will do that. Who could fail to relish the opportunity to make a difference, to improve the safety and health of fellow human beings, to help them live better and more productive lives, to assure our free society is secure and we prosper as individuals and a society.

I am sure after September 11, many of you may have changed your minds or altered your ideas and priorities as to how you may offer your services. Without question, everyone in this room was impacted, and in some ways our lives have changed.

I went to Ground Zero in New York just after the attack and was there with the President as he joined the thousands of firefighters, police and rescue workers along with volunteers from all across this country and the rest of

the world in saying human life and individual freedom are most precious and that we are committed to the preservation of both. As I arrived at the check point on Canal Street and worked my way through the dark streets of lower Manhattan to where the Twin Towers once stood, which just a few hours ago was alive and vibrant with human activity, I was overwhelmed with the sight of massive destruction, loss of life, disaster beyond anyone's imagination. At the same time I was swept by the human activity, the heroism and some of the deepest commitment and resolve I have ever seen in respect to saving lives, helping in any way they could, trying to make a difference in any and every way possible.

We have a great spirit in this country, and we held strong after September 11. We pulled together in an extraordinary way—professionals, workers, volunteers, citizens of New York, citizens of this country rallied around what was most important. And we did make a difference and are making a difference, and we will continue to make a difference in the lives and well being of every man, woman and child.

I want to share with you this evening two keys I have found useful in making a difference and achieving that goal you have set for yourself and advancing the profession you have chosen.

The first is simple: When dealing with controversial issues with multiple viewpoints, learn the art of compromise while at the same time maintaining the highest ethical standards.

Coming from an academic perspective, compromise is not easy to do. Compromise is not a bad word, and compromising does not mean casting aside our ideals or abandoning those who depend on us to protect their interests. Compromise means being flexible in some areas as we find real world solutions. It means finding a “win-win” where there is uncertainty and controversy. With a sound and ethical footing, the willingness to compromise is proper as long as we are able to advance to some degree. Here's why.

It's been said that the *good* is the enemy of the *best*. I think in practice the truth is that the *best* is the enemy of the *good*. Or another way to say it, don't let perfection get in the way of doing good.

When we will settle for nothing less than 100 percent, too often we find ourselves settling for nothing. It's been my experience that we can often find a compromise that takes us 80 percent closer toward our goal. It's only the last 20 percent that seems to be impossible to get agreement on.

My advice to you: Push for the 100 percent, but at the last minute settle for the 80 percent. Don't dig in your heels and demand 100 percent—and

walk away with nothing. You may find with time that you can get the additional 20 percent. But whether you do or not, you have still achieved something worthwhile. With the 80% done, you can then begin to articulate the value of the remaining 20%. My motto has been don't compromise early but when you can advance, compromise often.

Coming from the safety and health field, you may not convince your management or your client of the need to establish a full-fledged safety and health management system. But you can begin to pull together the facts and figures that demonstrate that safety and health add value. And you can identify the most serious issues and begin to deal with them.

Legendary UCLA Basketball Coach John Wooden put it this way, "Do not let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do."

Begin with small successes and build—but don't give up your ultimate dream. But also don't invest everything in an all-or-nothing strategy that could backfire and leave you back at the beginning.

A case in point that I am dealing with as we speak is ergonomics and OSHA's approach to addressing this workplace issue. The agency invested \$10 million and 10 years in a rule that resulted in a fierce battle around the science of ergonomics, occupational relationship and the cost of remedies. This led to the bipartisan repeal in Congress last year of the ergonomics standard that was to go into effect in January of 2001. The controversy around the old standard was such that Congress was able to use for the first time in history "The Congressional Review Act" to kill the old rule. The result : the Agency had to return to the drawing board. Time, money and good will went down the tubes with nothing to show for it.

Hindsight is always 20:20, but the reality is the old rule went too far within our way of governing. My problem is - where do we go from here?

Under the Bush Administration, we've chosen a more collaborative approach – to work with industry and labor to develop industry-specific and site-specific guidelines. Coupled with enforcement, outreach and assistance and research, this will be an effective strategy to reduce the pain and suffering from ergonomic hazards in the workplace.

It will be flexible. It will focus on prevention. It will enable employers with their employees to tailor solutions to fit their needs.

So, my first suggestion to you as you begin your professional lives is to be willing to compromise but maintain your professional standards. Find ways if you must to agree to less – and achieve more.

My second suggestion is to be willing to give your time beyond the normal work day - to make a difference.

Albert Schweitzer used to say, "Do something for somebody every day for which you do not get paid." That's a sound suggestion for any professional.

One of the issues I addressed just after the 9/11 attacks was to marshal safety and health volunteers to assist with the other volunteer activities. Professionals in AIHA, ASSE and the National Safety Council came forward, donating time and services. So did private companies such as MSA, Magic Gloves and the Julius Kraft Company regarding protective equipment.

Realizing the value of volunteers from all walks of life, President Bush has called on every American to dedicate at least 4,000 hours – two years over the course of a lifetime – to serving others. He calls this not a federal mandate but a profound individual commitment and a worthy national goal. It's an opportunity for each of us to demonstrate our commitment and acknowledge the blessings we've received as citizens of the greatest nation on earth.

There are many ways to serve – building homes with Habitat for Humanity, working in a local soup kitchen, tutoring a child, serving on the city council – the list goes on and on. These are all important and valuable endeavors. But I want to encourage you to use your professional training and expertise when you volunteer. Your impact can and should go beyond your immediate employer.

Take what you have learned about communicable diseases and serve on the board of the Salvation Army homeless shelter in your community. Take your knowledge of environmental issues and stand for election for your soil conservation district. Offer your services as an industrial hygienist, pro bono, to small businesses that can't afford to pay a consultant, after all worker protection is our goal. Join your professional association and volunteer your time to serve on the board, on committees and any way you can.

Put your experience and training to use where it can do the most good, beyond your normal job – and where your heart is. I can promise you won't regret it.

You have received a true treasure in your education here at Michigan. Use it to make a difference, make your unique contribution to your employer, your community, your profession and your country.

As head of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, I want to make a difference, and I want OSHA to make a difference. My kids say, - Dad you have been in the business of safety and health all your life and I respond by saying - not yet - but I will. I will continue to try to make a difference my entire life.

I know each of you want to make a difference as well. There are many possibilities for you to do that in your work, especially as you deal with different people with different ideas and you learn to continue to perfect the art of compromise. You'll also have many chances to change the world a little bit at a time, through the time you give to others freely, without compensation.

You have received the best – the best education, the best role models, the best opportunities. Now I trust that you will do your best with it. As General George Patton said, "If a man has done his best, what else is there?"

I look forward to joining you as we tackle the issues we have before us - as we do our best and give our best in every opportunity - as we continue to compromise for positive gain but strive for continuous improvement.

Truly we can ask no more – and expect no less. And we all – will benefit.

It's been an honor. Thank you.