

In Memoriam: Eula Bingham, 1929–2020

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The passing of a great woman is a sad time, but one tempered by the fond remembrance of all she accomplished and the joyous celebration of a life well lived. Dr. Eula Bingham died 13 June 2020 at the age of 90. There are few who combine her scientific integrity, engagement, vision, and humanity. She devoted her life to the cause of worker protection, and she served that cause as a researcher, public servant, activist, and mentor to three generations of colleagues and admirers.

We are among those who were profoundly influenced by Eula. We knew her best during the time she served as Assistant Secretary of Labor for Occupational Safety and Health under President Jimmy Carter. She was not the first head of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), nor its longest-serving, but her vision defined the agency at its best. She showed what OSHA could be: not just a government bureaucracy but, rather, a brave group of smart public servants devoted to human welfare.

She first worked with the agency from the outside, as the chair of OSHA's Coke Oven Advisory Committee, where her skilled leadership led to what was then the agency's most innovative standard, combining both a permissible exposure limit and specific engineering controls into one package.

Later, during her time at OSHA, the agency fought some of its toughest battles, won some of its greatest fights, and suffered one of its greatest defeats. In 1977, OSHA held hearings to establish a new beryllium standard. The manufacturers of beryllium were bitterly opposed any new regulation. Beryllium had been shown to cause a devastating lung disease at levels below the existing exposure limits, as well as cancer in both animals and humans. But it is a critical material for national defense, so the industry lobbied the Department of Defense and the predecessor to the Department of Energy, which in turn successfully pressured President Carter to cancel the rulemaking. Eula must have considered resigning, but she knew she could accomplish more. And she did—field sanitation, cotton dust, lead, benzene, and arsenic. Each involved a tough struggle against determined opposition, and each was ultimately a victory. (The U.S. Supreme Court later overturned the initial benzene standard on the grounds that OSHA had not established that the standard was “reasonably necessary,” but the Court also rejected the industry claim that OSHA was required to conduct a cost–benefit analysis.)

The cotton dust fight was especially hard. The textile workers ravaged by byssinosis, a lung disease caused by inhaling cotton particles, were among the poorest, least-represented, and most politically powerless industrial workers in the economy. Many were women and people of color. Most cotton textile mills were in the South. The workers were up against both powerful corporations and a group of antiregulatory White



Eula Bingham, 1929–2020. Image: Courtesy of the U.S. Department of Labor.

House economists. Eula and Secretary of Labor Ray Marshall were forced to fight, using not just scientific evidence and legal argument but also behind-the-scenes politics, effective ties with unions and community groups, and in Eula's case, a reported threat to quit. Final success did not come until 1981, after Eula left office, when the Supreme Court upheld the standard in its entirety.

Eula also believed that enforcing the regulations was as important as establishing them. She beefed up the enforcement program, especially for health risks, and worked hard to reorient OSHA's priorities toward the most dangerous hazards and exposures and the worst offenders, completing and extending work begun by her predecessor, Mort Corn. She took on issues such as fetal protection policies used to deny women jobs and repetitive strain injuries, issuing OSHA's first ergonomics citation. She guided the agency through the 1978 collapse of the cooling tower at Willow Island, West Virginia, which took 51 lives and was the deadliest construction accident in modern U.S. history.

Eula recognized that educated and empowered workers are essential to health and safety. She established the New Directions Training Grants, which have educated more than 1.8 million workers. She called it her proudest achievement.

She knew that knowledge is empowering, and she was an early supporter of the right-to-know movement. There had been significant opposition within OSHA to a “labeling” standard, as they called it, which would require that workers be given information about hazardous materials in the workplace. Many health professionals thought it was a waste of the agency's resources; that workers would not understand or might misuse the information, and that managing chemical safety ought to be left to the experts. Eula strongly disagreed and ultimately won over the critics. Although OSHA issued a proposed standard in 1981, it was quickly withdrawn in the first days of the Reagan Administration. Nevertheless, her influence paid off when labor, environmental, and community groups passed state and local right-to-know laws all around the country, forcing the chemical industry itself to

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lobby for uniform federal regulation and leading to the Hazard Communication Standard. Even out of office, Eula remained part of the fight.

After leaving OSHA, Eula served as a distinguished professor of environmental health and as vice president at the University of Cincinnati. Even in her 80s she continued to work with unions, environmental organizations, consumer groups, and progressive

legislators. She was a champion of working people to the end. She never gave up.

Eula would be the first to say that she was only part of a movement, that her accomplishments were never hers alone, and that they required collective will and action. But a collective effort is made by individuals. She led us. She inspired us. The part she played was fundamental.