



David W. King

DANIEL A. OKUN

1917–2007

Elected in 1973

*“For innovative contributions to sanitary engineering
and to teaching and research.”*

BY PHILIP C. SINGER

DDANIEL A. OKUN, Kenan Professor of Environmental Engineering, University of North Carolina (UNC), Chapel Hill, was hailed worldwide for his groundbreaking discoveries and for the protection of pristine water sources, water-resources management, water reclamation and reuse, watershed protection, and technologies and institutional solutions to water-supply and wastewater management in developing countries.

During his long career, Dan worked in 89 countries and was a consultant to municipal and legislative planning committees throughout the United States. He helped design a water-treatment plant in Bangkok, Thailand; established a graduate program in sanitary engineering in Lima, Peru; and studied water supply and pollution control in China for the World Bank. At home in Chapel Hill, he led a campaign to build Cane Creek Dam and Reservoir in the 1980s to ensure that the UNC campus and the city of Chapel Hill would have the highest quality drinking water.

Dan, with his wife Beth, was also an active participant in a variety of social causes related to the rights of disenfranchised people and communities. In the mid-1960s, they both worked

to fight to abolish segregation and ensure racial integration in Chapel Hill. In the early 1970s, they were outspoken critics of the Vietnam War, and as chair of the Faculty Senate at UNC, Dan helped maintain order during that difficult period.

In the words of Barbara K. Rimer, dean of UNC's School of Global Public Health, "Dan Okun cared deeply about his school, his community, his state, and his world. And he turned that commitment into action, whether through water projects or social action. Few professors have influenced more students, more professionals, or more policy decisions around the world than Dr. Okun. His work has influenced international policy making for organizations like the World Bank, United Nations, and the World Health Organization. There is nowhere I go that people don't talk about Dan with awe," she said. "Dan was a model citizen/professor, and I am so glad to have known him."

Okun began his career at UNC in 1952; he was chair of the Department of Environmental Sciences and Engineering from 1955 to 1973. Under his leadership, the department faculty increased from three to 25. Although he retired from teaching in 1982, he remained actively involved in the profession for the rest of his life through writing, lecturing, and consulting.

"Dan influenced generations of environmental engineers and public health professionals with his clear thinking and equal clarity of purpose," said Michael D. Aitken, chair of the School of Global Public Health Department of Environmental Sciences and Engineering. "His life's work on water supply and, more recently, on water reuse earned him an international reputation that few attain. His humanity equaled his professional stature—from his concern for safe drinking water in developing countries to his engagement in local social issues to his model service as an academic citizen at this university."

Okun was the first engineer from North Carolina elected to the National Academy of Engineering and later to the Institute of Medicine. He chaired the Water Science and Technology Board of the National Research Council from 1991 to 1994 and served on many committees and councils of the U.S. Public Health Service, World Health Organization, Pan American Health Organization, and National Academy of Sciences, among

others. Among the many awards he received were the Association of Environmental Engineering and Science Professors (AEESP) Founders' Award, the American Academy of Environmental Engineers (AAEE) Gordon Maskew Fair Award, the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) Simon Freese Award, the Water Environment Federation (WEF) Gordon Maskew Fair Medal, the American Water Works Association (AWWA) Abel Wolman Award of Excellence, the Environmental Water Resources Institute (EWRI) Lifetime Achievement Award, and the International Water Association (IWA) Grand Award. In August 1999, *Engineering News-Record*, in honor of its 125 years of publishing, named Okun one of the top 125 engineers who "singularly and collectively helped shape this nation and the world."

In June 2007, Okun celebrated his 90th birthday with a party at the Carol Woods Retirement Center in Chapel Hill. More than 220 people came that day to offer their warm wishes and to celebrate the life of their friend and colleague. Just six months later, on December 21, 2007, many of them returned to the retirement center for a memorial service in his honor.

As Michael Aitken said, "I believe Dan's greatest legacy will be this Department of Environmental Sciences and Engineering. He transformed it from a traditional program in sanitary engineering to the multidisciplinary department we are today, at a time when this was unheard of. He was truly a man of vision who pushed us to excel even through the last years of his life. We will miss his wisdom; we will miss him."

Dan was a pioneer who profoundly influenced scientific, technical, and policy advancements in the field of environmental sciences and engineering. An engineer's engineer, he cast a giant shadow on the broad field of water-supply and water-resources management, and he will be greatly missed by the many students, faculty, and professionals with whom he worked at home and abroad. His legacy will surely live on among all engineers and scientists dealing with issues of water and health.

To commemorate his life's work and his contributions to engineering and water-resources management in developing countries, the UNC chapter of Engineers Without Borders was

renamed the Dan Okun Chapter of Engineers Without Borders.

His daughter wrote: "Daniel Alexander Okun was the son of Will and Leah Okun, immigrants from Belarus; he grew up in Brooklyn, NY. He met Beth Griffin in New Orleans when he was in the Army and she was a social worker. The couple married and spent more than six decades together traveling the world, raising a family, and serving their Chapel Hill community. Dan was beloved by his family for his wonderful sense of humor, his firmly held beliefs, and his activism. He was an extraordinary father and grandfather who taught well his values of honesty, integrity, and community involvement. He is greatly missed.

Dan is survived by his brother, Milton Okun; his son, Michael Okun; his daughter, Tema Okun; and his grandsons, Will and Joedan Okun.

