

Peter Kovacic

August 1, 1921—March 11, 2022
La Mesa, California

Peter Kovacic was born in a log cabin in Wylandville, Pennsylvania, on August 1, 1921, the sixth of seven children to Marko and Barbara (Radenic) Kovacic, immigrants from Croatia. He grew up in a coal-mining community outside Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His father worked in the coal mines, and his parents had a farm where they also took in boarders.

After completing high school, where he was strongly influenced in his socio-political beliefs by his science teacher and mentor, he followed his older brother Michael to Hanover College, in Hanover, Indiana. He majored in chemistry and mathematics with a minor in physics. In 1943 he graduated with a B.A., serving as valedictorian of his class.

After college he attended the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for three years and in 1946 earned a Ph.D. in organic chemistry, with minors in biochemistry and physiology. During this period, he worked primarily on anti-malarial drugs and met Dorothy A. Fehrenbacher, a UIUC alumna, who was to become his wife on June 29, 1946, in Baltimore, Maryland.

The couple moved to Boston, Massachusetts, where Dr. Kovacic did postdoctoral work at Massachusetts Institute of Technology for one year, from 1946 to 1947, working on the synthesis of barbiturates. Their daughter Lynn Celeste was born during this period. Dr. Kovacic then worked as an Instructor at Columbia University in New York City from 1947 to 1948. He subsequently took a position as Research Chemist with E. I. DuPont Company, in Wilmington, Delaware, where he researched polymers, especially neoprene vulcanization., until 1955. Peter and Dorothy made their home in Cranston Heights, Delaware, and sons Jan Peter, Paul Leonard, and Don Stephen were born during this time.

Leaving the corporate world, Dr. Kovacic accepted a teaching position at Case Institute of Technology (later Case Western Reserve University), in Cleveland, Ohio. He rose from Assistant Professor to full Professor of Chemistry between 1955 and 1968. His research interests included aromatic substitutions, N-haloamines, metal halides, polymers, mechanism of carcinogenesis, oxidative stress, and oxygen radicals. In 1964 he was awarded an honorary Doctor of Science by Hanover College. Peter and Dorothy lived in Gates Mills, Ohio, and sons Eric Dorson and Ken Alan were born in Cleveland. Peter's interest in politics and world affairs manifested in support for numerous issues and organizations, including world peace, nuclear disarmament, ending the war in Vietnam, and volunteering in support of his favorite political candidates.

In 1968 Dr. Kovacic became Professor of Organic Chemistry and Research Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where he developed the graduate research program in organic chemistry for the school. His research interests during this period emphasized oxidative stress, oxygen radicals, and mechanism of drugs and toxins. He was interested in using humor to support learning and healing and was known for introducing many jokes into his lectures and for a once-a-year tradition of dressing up in Hawaiian shirts and giving a goofy lecture. From 1967 to 1970 he served as a member of the editorial board for Macromolecular Syntheses and from 1978 to 1987 as a member of the editorial board for Review of Chemical Intermediates. In 1975 he was given the Award of Merit by the Pittsburgh Chemists Club. In 1978 he served as an Exchange Scholar in Yugoslavia for the National Academy of Science. In 1983 he taught and lectured in Yugoslavia as a Fellow in the Fulbright Scholar Program. Also in 1983, he published his book

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Fundamental Chemistry of Life and Death. He was given the U.S. Presidential Research Award by President Lyndon B. Johnson and was named an AAAS Fellow by the American Association for the Advancement of Science. In 1987 he officially retired from UWM, although his teaching, research, and publications were to continue fulltime. Peter and Dorothy made their home in Fox Point, Wisconsin, close to Doctor's Park and Lake Michigan, from which Peter drew sustenance from nature.

From 1987 to 1997, Peter and Dorothy traveled extensively, ostensibly to find a location in which to retire, but actually to continue Peter's teaching, lecturing, research interactions, and publication collaborations as Visiting Professor at eighteen different universities and colleges—twelve in the United States, three in Australia, two in New Zealand, and one in Canada. During this time Peter and Dorothy had a second home in Concord, California, and Dr. Kovacic taught at Saint Mary's College of California, in Moraga. Their travels included many tours of natural wonders, especially wildflower blooms.

From 1997 to 2019, Dr. Kovacic taught, continued to conduct research, and published articles, primarily on medicinal chemistry, at San Diego State University, where he served as Adjunct Professor of Chemistry and where, in his later years, he worked three days a week until he retired a second time in 2019. During this period Dr. Kovacic served as Guest Editor for Current Medicinal Chemistry. In 2003 he was awarded an Alumni Achievement Award from Hanover College. From 1998 to 2020, Peter and Dorothy made their home at San Diego Country Estates, in Ramona, California, and continued to travel, especially to their favorite national and state parks in California. Peter continued his interest in politics, supporting numerous democratic organizations and candidates and writing to various elected officials.

Dr. Kovacic was extremely proud of his teaching, which included undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate levels, and topics such as introductory organic chemistry, reactive intermediates in organic chemistry, heterocyclic chemistry, aromatic chemistry, macromolecular chemistry (introduction, conducting, crosslinked, and thermally stable polymers), and medicinal chemistry.

During his lifetime Peter Kovacic published over 450 papers. His research interests were extremely wide-ranging and emphasized interdisciplinary fields: redox metal halides, aromatic substitutions, Bredt's Rule, Adamantanes, N-haloamines, conducting polymers, Poly(p-phenylene), metabolism of drugs and toxins, bioelectrochemistry, cell signaling, oxidative stress, reactive oxygen species, and electron transfer. In his later years, with diminished eyesight, he was especially interested in documenting the application of his unifying theory, based on iminium and electron transfer, to hundreds of fields of medicinal and biochemistry. Dr. Kovacic produced his last published paper, on COVID drugs, in 2020, at the age of 99.

In 2016, after experiencing some debilitating ailments, Peter moved into assisted living, most recently at Grossmont Gardens in La Mesa, California. Dorothy continued living independently in their home until only a few months before her death, on July 16, 2018. On March 7, 2022, Dr. Kovacic was found slumped over his desk and was taken to the hospital in La Mesa, California. He was suffering from severe sepsis and died peacefully in his sleep a few days later, at 12:30am, on March 11, 2022.

Peter Kovacic is survived by his daughter Lynn Dennison, three of his five sons—Jan, Don, and Ken, and by numerous grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren. His wife, sons Paul and Eric, and all of his siblings preceded him in death. Peter will be cremated, and his ashes will be placed at the Peter and Dorothy Kovacic Family memorial stone, at the Cottage Grove Cemetery in Dane County, Wisconsin (outside Madison), where their son Paul is buried.