

Dr. Joseph John Breen

1942 - 1999

"The best way to protect the environment is to avoid pollution altogether by creating safer chemicals and developing greener ways of doing business. This has to start at the educational level in high schools and universities."

- Dr. Joseph J. Breen

Joseph J. Breen was born in Waterbury on July 22, 1942, to John and Mary Breen. As a boy in Waterbury during the 1950s Joseph Breen walked from French Street to Russell School on the city's West Side Hill. In those days, the Naugatuck River was a multicolored open sewer for toxic chemicals and industrial waste. As he crossed the river, Breen could well have found inspiration in those murky depths, and eventually an extraordinary career as one of America's leading environmentalists.

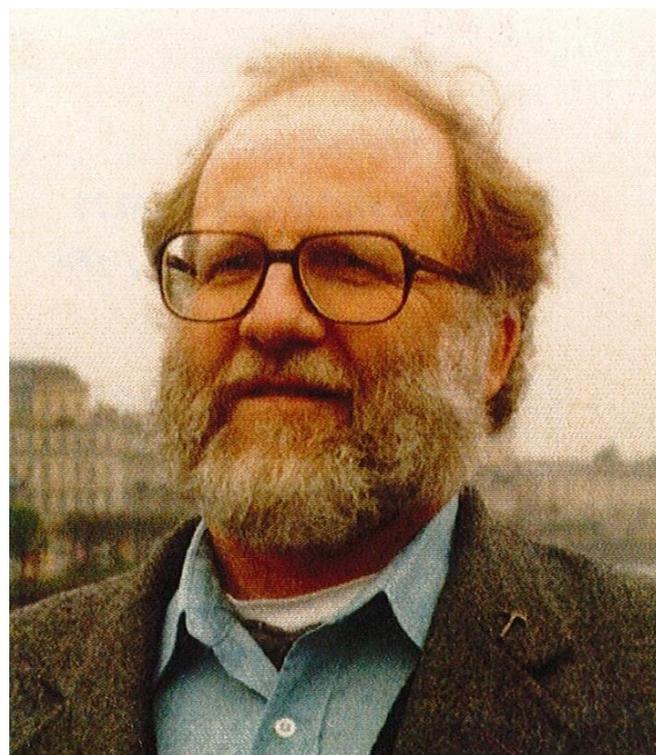
A member of the Crosby High School Class of 1960, he went on to graduate from Fairfield University and then earn a doctorate in chemistry from Duke University. At home on weekends from Fairfield, he worked as an orderly at a hospital; working in the laboratory and autopsies, sparking an interest in diseases and cancers of the human body.

Breen served in the Marine Corps during the Vietnam War. He later served two years with the Peace Corps in Morocco. In 1977, he began a twenty year career as a chemist and manager at the fledgling U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, demonstrating significant leadership in many major Agency programs.

While at the EPA, Breen played a major role in creating the Design for the Environment and Green Chemistry programs, both of which called for the creative use of voluntary efforts to reduce risk and protect human health and the environment. He was also involved in the agency's initiatives on Asbestos in Schools and Public Buildings, Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention and an EPA-VA study on toxins in the tissue of Vietnam Veterans.

Following his retirement from the EPA in 1997, Breen collaborated with colleagues from industry, government, and academia to found the Green Chemistry Institute, a not-for-profit organization devoted to promoting and advancing green chemistry – environmentally benign chemical products and processes that reduce or eliminate the creation of hazardous substances.

In his obituary published in the *Green Chemistry* journal, Breen was remembered for his dedication to breaking down barriers: "Green Chemistry Knows No Borders was a centerpiece of Joe's approach," wrote Paul T. Anastas, then Chief of the Industrial Chemistry Branch, Office of Pollution Prevention and Toxics, US EPA, "as evidenced by his almost evangelical tours which



spread the word of green chemistry across national borders."

Breen's passion extended to inspiring new generations of scientists. He spent over 15 years actively promoting science education, co-founded the Kids in Chemistry and Science-by-Mail programs, and edited the high school chemistry text, *Chemistry in the Community*. He taught environmental chemistry at Hood College, Trinity College, and American University.

Less than a month before his death in 1999, Breen was honored for his lifetime achievements with the Distinguished Service to Green Chemistry Award from the president of the American Chemical Society. At that time, he was recognized for his "extraordinary and tireless efforts in the advancement of Green Chemistry globally through research, education and outreach."

Upon his death, Breen was remembered by a colleague as having left "an international legacy of knowledge and an inspired group of followers who are committed to continuing the work he began."

Today, his memory lives on in the American Chemical Society award bearing his name, the Joseph Breen Memorial Fellowship for young international green chemistry scholars. And, perhaps in part due to his efforts, the Naugatuck River runs virtually unpolluted once again.