Coming Home to Columbia

Sociomedical Sciences Welcomes Lisa Metsch as Its New Chair

by Maria Andriella O’Brien
Metsch joined the Mailman School in July not only as SMS chair but also as the first scholar to hold the newly endowed Stephen Smith Professorship. She took over the SMS reins from Amy Fairchild, PhD, MPH, who had served as chair since 2008.

Metsch is an internationally recognized leader in the prevention of HIV among populations with substance abuse problems. She built that reputation through her influential work at the University of Miami’s Miller School of Medicine, where she was professor of Epidemiology and Public Health and director of the Division of Health Services Research and Policy, among other positions.

Metsch’s interest in HIV/AIDS was kindled during her years as a Columbia undergraduate, when she worked with SMS Professor Karoly Lynn Siegel, PhD, on one of the first studies of barriers to HIV testing among gay men. There Metsch witnessed firsthand the devastating impact of the AIDS epidemic. “To visit patients with HIV, you had to wear protective clothing,” she recalls, “I saw fearful families shun their loved ones, and young people watch their friends die.”

Those early experiences set the stage for a career that has flourished at the intersection of research, policy, and program implementation as Metsch used a social science perspective to investigate HIV prevention and develop effective interventions for underserved populations.

A SOCIAL SCIENCE LENS ON HIV PREVENTION

Building on her sociology background, Metsch went on to earn a PhD in medical sociology at the University of Florida. Her work has shown that the social sciences provide the perspective and tools to examine how public health problems are embedded in social, cultural, economic, and political contexts.

Metsch was one of the early researchers in the era of antiretroviral therapy to articulate the importance of creating prevention and primary care programs for people living with HIV, not simply those at risk of becoming infected. She was part of the multi-site team funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that developed and tested the first evidence-based approach to linking those who are newly diagnosed with HIV to medical treatment. Her current work focuses on the individual needs of students. Her work with doctoral and master’s students at the Miller School of Medicine won high praise, including the 2011 Public Health Student Association’s Lecturer of the Year Award.

As head of the search committee for the SMS chair, Michael S. Sparer, PhD, JD, chair of the Department of Health Policy and Management, marveled at finding the perfect candidate. “Lisa’s a natural lead-

“Aside from being an excellent researcher, Lisa is going to be a superb mentor to junior faculty and researchers—a real visionary for the department.”

— MICHAEL SPARER, PHD, JD
CHAIR OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH POLICY AND MANAGEMENT
They teach. They investigate. And they write! Every year faculty members at Columbia’s Mailman School contribute to the lay and scientific literature with books that illuminate a range of vital issues in public health. Here’s a sample of recent faculty books.

1. **Am I My Genes? Confronting Fate and Family Secrets in the Age of Genetic Testing**, by Robert Klitzman, MD, professor of clinical Sociomedical Sciences, explores how the revolution in genetic testing has opened a Pandora’s box of personal, ethical, and even spiritual questions.

2. **Classic Problems of Probability**, by Prakash Gorroochurn, PhD, assistant professor of Biostatistics, offers a tour of classic probability problems that have been selected for their interesting history, the way they have shaped the field, and their counterintuitive nature.

3. **Epidemic City: The Politics of Public Health in New York**, by James Colgrove, PhD, MPH, associate professor of Sociomedical Sciences, chronicles the challenges faced by the New York City Department of Health from the 1960s to the present and examines how public health services have adapted to the competing demands of public need and political pressure.

4. **Global Population Ageing: Peril or Promise**, by Linda P. Fried, MD, MPH, and John W. Rowe, MD, professor of Health Policy and Management, were contributing authors to this monograph from the World Economic Forum’s Global Agenda Council on Ageing Society. The book identifies opportunities and makes recommendations for adapting to an aging world and frames a forward-thinking vision. Dean Fried also served as a co-editor.

5. **Injury Research: Theories, Methods, and Approaches**, by Guohua Li, MD, DrPH, and Susan Baker, MPH, ScD(Hon.) of Johns Hopkins University, co-edited this textbook on the latest advances in understanding the causes and outcomes of injury and the strategies to prevent them. The book features contributions from experts from public health, medicine, engineering, and behavioral and social sciences.

6. **A Plague of Prisons: The Epidemiology of Mass Incarceration in America**, by Ernest L. Drucker, PhD, adjunct professor of Epidemiology, examines the forces behind the massive growth of the inmate population in U.S. prisons through an epidemiological lens and argues that mass incarceration spreads like an epidemic through the families and social networks of the poorest Americans.

7. **Understanding Global Sexualities: New Frontiers**, by Richard Parker, PhD, professor of Sociomedical Sciences, is a co-editor—along with three others—of this book exploring theory and policy around sexuality, including such contentious areas as the relationship between sexuality and gender, and new forms of sexuality emerging in the developed and developing world.

Some notable titles from members of the broader Mailman School community appear below. Help fill our bookshelf by alerting us to other recent books by alumni. Contact: mailmancomm@columbia.edu.

8. **Innovation Generation: How to Produce Creative and Useful Scientific Ideas**, by Roberta B. Ness, MD, MPH ’89, dean of the University of Texas School of Public Health, offers the tools needed to think outside the box in public health. Ness is a Department of Epidemiology alumna.

9. **No Time to Lose: A Life in Pursuit of Deadly Viruses**, by Peter Piot, MD, PhD, director of the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine and former head of UNAIDS, tells the story of his work at the forefront of battling viruses such as HIV and Ebola. Piot is a member of the Mailman School Board of Overseers.
What’s Next for the Class of 2012?

There is no such thing as a typical career track for Mailman grads. Just ask the Class of 2012.

Since graduating, they have done everything from researching an early-warning system for heat waves in India to playing on the Israeli national lacrosse team. "No matter where they end up, Mailman graduates are sure to be doing something with meaning and impact," says Assistant Dean Tanya Cobbs Leslie, director of Career Services. Broadly speaking, about 20 percent accept positions at public health agencies, another 20 percent pursue careers at academic and research organizations, and roughly equal numbers target nonprofits. Upwards of 10 percent choose to work at for-profit organizations, a number that has risen slightly in recent years as healthcare reform has driven demand for new talent. Another 10 percent will pursue a higher degree.

More from Mailman grads below, as they describe how they chose careers in areas like food policy, reproductive health, HIV, behavioral health, and consulting.

**SARAH BAUM** MPH, Population & Family Health
As project manager at Ibis Reproductive Health in Oakland, I am working on various reproductive-health research projects in Latin America and the United States, to improve access to safe and high-quality contraception and abortion services. I collaborate with clinicians, social scientists, researchers, and demographers to address under-researched and controversial reproductive health issues, with a focus on restrictive settings.

**JENNA BLOCK** MPH, Sociomedical Sciences
This June, I competed in the European Championship Games in Amsterdam as part of the Israeli national lacrosse team. It’s the first time that Israel has had a men’s and a women’s team. My team won the championship. From there, I traveled with the teams in Israel to promote the sport. Then in July, I started at the Advisory Board Company in Washington, D.C., doing healthcare consulting. During my time at Mailman, I did two internships—the first with the Brooklyn District Public Health Office, then, over the summer, at a smaller consulting firm. I found I really liked the idea of marrying my knowledge of public health with my interest in business.

**MARIANA COTLEAR** MPH, Health Policy & Management
Since graduating, I’ve worked in communications and development at FoodCorps, a national service organization dedicated to improving school food across the country. We place service members in high-needs public schools, where they spend a year teaching about nutrition, building school gardens, and sourcing food from local farms. Food policy and obesity prevention is still an emerging field, so it was up to me to create my own job opportunities. At Mailman, I co-founded Columbia Food Policy & Obesity Prevention (FPOP) and served as its first president. One of our objectives was to connect with leaders from the amazing food policy community in New York City and use their expertise as a resource to supplement our education. Networking tirelessly on behalf of FPOP, I also began to look for an innovative organization that would allow me to leverage my diverse skills in the service of improving how people eat. FoodCorps was in its start-up phase at that time, and as soon as I heard of it, I knew that I wanted to be a part of building it.

**BECKY HANNA** MPH, Epidemiology
In August, I started at the Kaiser Family Foundation as part of the one-year Allan Rosenfield Fellowship program. I am working on the foundation’s public-opinion and survey research team, which designs, conducts, and analyzes the foundation’s surveys. These surveys report on health issues like levels of health insurance, health outcomes, and people’s opinions on health policy. Working on both monthly tracking and annual surveys, I will be exposed to the full spectrum of survey research. This is great, as I wanted to do something analytical but did not want to spend all my time cleaning data. In this fellowship, I will also help write research briefs that are read by both academics and the general public. To cap it off, I will get to design my own research project. Another bonus: The foundation is in Menlo Park in Northern California, two miles from where my husband lives.
Aung is the First Global Health Track Student to Do a Practicum in Myanmar. Behind Her Looms Mount Popa.

Kyisin Aung

It wasn’t supposed to be about breastfeeding. Water had always been what intrigued Kyisin Aung, MPH ‘12. Her interest in the subject went back to high school and a weeklong research project on water quality. Living in Thailand at the time, Aung found herself increasingly fascinated by environmental science—so much so that she majored in it at Towson University in Maryland.

A six-month internship after graduation with the World Health Organization in Geneva led Aung to marry her interests in environmental science and public health. The Mailman School’s Environmental Health Sciences (EHS) program and Global Health Track seemed like the perfect fit for Aung to develop the skills needed to explore waterborne infectious diseases in global settings.

Two years later Aung, 25, graduated with one of the School’s top honors—the John and Kathleen Gorman Public Health Humanitarian Award. Among the faculty members she impressed along the way was EHS Professor Joseph Graziano, PhD. Aung assisted him on the amazingly complex $15 million Superfund grant-renewal application, the scope of which covered subjects as disparate as epidemiology, hydrology, chemistry, and engineering. “It was not easy for a public health student to serve as a reader and editor, and yet she did it with absolute distinction—she’s just very professional beyond her age,” says Graziano.

Aung is the first Global Health Track student to do a practicum in Myanmar. Behind her looms Mount Popa.

Keletso Makofane  MPH, Biostatistics

I am working as a program associate at The Global Forum on MSM & HIV, focusing on men who have sex with men and on HIV. The job is exciting because I will get to carry out research and do some scholarly writing while being close to HIV advocacy. Before I came to Mailman, I did some advocacy work—specifically, community organizing around violence against lesbian women in Cape Town, South Africa. To be an activist is an aspect of myself I don’t want to neglect. I learned a lot at Mailman, but the thing that sticks out in my mind right now is to take a critical view of the world—and even (especially!) a critical view of the work that the public health field does—while not being paralyzed by how imperfect the world is.

Russell McBride  PhD, Epidemiology

A few weeks after enrolling at the Mailman School, I was already actively engaged in a research project in cancer epidemiology. This was followed by a nearly constant string of opportunities to contribute to and collaborate with researchers within the School and at NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital, which greatly enhanced my studies at Columbia. After completing the MPH, I was accepted onto the Epidemiology PhD program, and was offered a spot working on Dr. Alfred Neugut’s T32 Cancer Training Grant. When it was time to begin the dissertation process, I was encouraged to apply for an early career research award, which set into motion my thesis project to examine the relationship between chronic obesity and hormonal signaling receptors in prostate cancer. After another two or three years working in the molecular pathology lab, I defended my thesis (graduated with honors, and the Gelman Award), and was offered a tenure-track faculty position in the departments of Pathology and Translational Epidemiology at Mount Sinai School of Medicine.

Destiny Ramjohn  PhD, Sociomedical Sciences

Since March, I’ve been working with the U.S. Army Institute of Public Health Epidemiology with the disease-surveillance unit and the behavioral-health social outcomes program. I work with a team to respond to soldiers with behavioral-health issues like suicidal and homicidal ideation. I work with the field investigation section alongside psychologists and other scientists. When an incident such as the November 2009 shooting at Fort Hood in Texas occurs, we collect information to create a portrait of the event, and then recommend policy changes to support the mental health of affected soldiers. As an example, we might suggest ways to improve how the Army tracks high-risk soldiers over time. At Mailman, I did a lot of work with vulnerable populations such as young people living with HIV/AIDS. I got a thorough grounding in rigorous qualitative research methods. I’m using these techniques in my new position. Right now, I’m based at the Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland. It’s quite a shift from Columbia and New York, but it’s the kind of shift that Mailman has prepared me for.

Amruta Sarma  MPH, Environmental Health Sciences

I have a student research fellowship in Ahmedabad, India, as part of the Fulbright Program. I will be here for nine months working on a project looking at heat waves in Ahmedabad, where summer temperatures reach above 46°C or 115°F. We are implementing an early-warning system designed to prevent sickness and deaths during heat waves, and following up to determine the efficacy of the program. After that, I’m going to Yale for a PhD—I’ve been admitted into a doctoral program in the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. At the end of my second semester at Columbia, I was offered a research position, working with Professor Patrick Kinney and Assistant Professor Darby Jack, looking at air-pollution mitigation and cardiovascular risk. We have submitted one paper for publication, and are working on a second manuscript. My work with Dr. Kinney and Dr. Jack has been formative to me in deciding to get a PhD. And last summer, I was a teaching assistant at the Columbia Summer Research Institute for doctors and fellows at NewYork-Presbyterian. I’ve also TA’d for the EHS core course. I really enjoy teaching, and this is another impetus for my decision to pursue my doctorate.

Rusell McBride
It was Aung's practicum that really captured the spirit of the Gorman Award, placing her in a country in transition, doing work with a significant impact even as it opened Aung's eyes to a public health passion other than water.

Aung knew exactly where she wanted to go for her practicum. Born in Myanmar, Aung left the country at the age of 12 when her father's job with the United Nations relocated her family to New York. For decades, Myanmar, also known as Burma, had been closed off to much of the world. It was ruled by a strict military junta from 1962 to 2011, and economic development was weak. To Aung, it was a place where her language skills and cultural knowledge could make a difference. “She wanted to work with UNICEF on water and sanitation,” recalls Manuela Orjuela-Grimm, MD, ScM, who directs the Global Health Track in EHS, “but instead was placed with a maternal and child nutrition group.”

Childhood nutrition is a serious concern in Myanmar. The WHO estimates that almost 30 percent of Burmese children under age 5 are underweight. While breastfeeding is known to help prevent childhood malnourishment, morbidity, and mortality, little is known about breastfeeding practices in Myanmar. UNICEF and WHO had developed a questionnaire on the subject, but it had to be pretested in Myanmar and adapted for local context. They needed someone who could speak the language and understand the mechanics of the assessment. Enter Aung.

Determining her role took some negotiation. The country is only just beginning to open up to researchers. Orjuela-Grimm recalls a number of predawn Skype calls with Aung and her practicum sponsors on the other side of the globe as plans evolved. With things in flux, Orjuela-Grimm wanted to ensure that Aung and her practicum sponsor knew that there was somebody at Columbia supporting the young graduate student.

Once plans were finalized, Aung traveled to remote villages by boat to pretest the breastfeeding instrument. Focus-group discussions with mothers had to be held in open-air locations. With feedback from the focus groups, Aung was able to modify the questionnaire and develop both Burmese and English versions. “The tool will be useful for other humanitarian and public health programs that promote infant and young-child nutrition,” explains Orjuela-Grimm. “In other words, her accomplishments could have far-reaching implications for this country.”

For her thesis, Aung was able to combine her newfound interest in breastfeeding with environmental science. She examined breastfeeding policies in areas where malaria is endemic and DDT residue can be found in breast milk.

Post-graduation, Aung’s experience with Graziano and the Superfund grant application has landed her consulting work in proposal development with CIET International. The organization conducts epidemiological research and training in developing countries, and is looking to build up funding. Longterm, she hopes to return to Burma perhaps by working with the U.S. Agency for International Development. “My passion,” she says, “is global health.”

Rebecca Fein

Rebecca Fein, MPH ’12, is standing in a field of poppies talking about how New York City and the Mailman School changed her life. It's actually not a field of poppies, she corrects with a laugh, but a large field sandwiched between a redwood forest and a river, just 15 minutes away from the Pacific Ocean, “the most beautiful place in the world.”

Fein is in her friend’s backyard in Northern California taking stock of the past two years of her life and what she plans to do next. But first she wants to explain how mind-blowing New York City was to a small-town girl from California. “I knew I wanted to do a city at some point,” Fein explains. “And if you’re going to do any city, you might as well do ‘The City,’ which was a big draw for Columbia. I lived in Harlem throughout my time there. There was a level of diversity that I had never experienced before, and I think that it broadened my horizons spectacularly.”

Fein, who graduated in May, returned the favor by doing her best to broaden horizons within the Mailman community. And for that, she was presented with the Bernard Challeen Spirit Award, an honor that recognizes a graduating student for building community across departments at the School. As director of the Medical Campus’ The Vagina Monologues production (two years running), student leader for SHAG (Sexual and Reproductive Health Action Group), and peer counselor at Columbia’s Rape Crisis/Anti-Violence Support Center, Fein immersed herself in the community life of Columbia.

The Monologues touched at the heart of Fein’s interest in public health—specifically in sexual-assault prevention and education. Volunteering at a teen clinic in high school was her first step into this realm, followed by work with a health-promotion team at her alma mater, the University of California at Davis.

“Looking at my supervisors there, everyone had an MPH,” Fein recalls. “I started to look at what public health was and what it meant—it just really seemed to fit.”

She set her sights on the Mailman School’s Heilbrunn Department of Population and Family Health because it was the only program she found that specialized in reproductive and sexual health. Once there, she found a department full of kindred spirits. “I got to spend a good deal of time with some amazing professors,” she says. “I gained some really incredible relationships with them.”

Fein’s advisor, Debra Kalmuss, PhD, professor of clinical Population and Family Health, notes that the department’s faculty members know that their job is not just to teach in the classroom, “but to help students to apply the skills that we are teaching them. That is what they will need to run programs—concrete skills.” That commitment to students so impressed Fein that she and fellow student Sharon Washington, MPH ’12, produced an eight-minute video in tribute to the department’s faculty.

Now that she has graduated, Fein is combining her love of media with her interest in the issue of sexual violence by working on a documentary project with a filmmaker friend—the one with the breathtaking backyard. The Journey of Powerful Voices focuses on people who’ve experienced sexual assault and their paths to healing. The idea began to take shape while she was still a student, and the film proposal became the basis for her MPH capstone project.

The short vignettes, to be shown on the Web, feature individuals telling their stories. The ultimate goal is to develop this project into a nonprofit organization and website that helps sexual-assault survivors to process what happened to them and alleviate the shame and self-blame that so many of them feel.

“It’s really extraordinary for a master’s student to leave here having already formulated a new program and developed a proposal, and be ready to run with it,” says Kalmuss. “I really think Becky is going to do very significant work focusing on empowering women.”
Man on a Mission

Thomas Campbell Jackson, MPH ‘98, has a few words for his fellow alums: Connect! Get involved!

Thomas Campbell Jackson, MPH ‘98, loves networking and knows a thing or two about making connections. But that doesn’t mean he enjoys talking about himself or being the focus of a magazine profile. In fact, over the course of an interview, the venture capitalist and sometime philanthropist will steadfastly explain why the subject of this article should be someone else. Anyone else.

So it wasn’t surprising that follow-up emails from Jackson included suggestions on more interesting Mailman School alumni to profile. And he knows and networks with a remarkable number of them. Since joining the School’s Alumni Association Board in 2004 and then succeeding Michael Barnett, MS ’70, JD, as president of the Board this past March, Jackson has thrown himself into the life of the School and the heart of the alumni community. “Thomas believes very strongly in the School’s mission,” says Nina Rothschild, DrPH ’00, a fellow Alumni Board member. She marvels at Jackson’s enthusiasm and dedication, adding, “Working with him is a pleasure. He sees right to the core of whatever the issue is.”

In typically self-deprecating style, Jackson is the first to admit that he did not start out as an engaged alumnus after getting his MPH in Health Policy and Management. “I was like many graduates: You get your degree and you run out the door,” he explains. “But eventually someone reached out to me to get involved, and I grew increasingly appreciative of the connections that I had made through Mailman and the amazing work that goes on here.”

These days Jackson, who serves on Mailman’s Board of Overseers as well as the Alumni Board, is immersed in a range of activities across the School. For instance, he connected the Environmental Health Sciences department with a company that makes high-throughput automated microscopy systems and donated equipment that is helping to speed up the department’s lab work. He is also helping to promote exciting, cutting-edge work in the Epidemiology department and elsewhere. It’s a networking thing: At Mailman, just as at Easton Capital Investment Group, the life sciences venture capital firm where he is a partner, Jackson finds that making connections spurs success—and also yields serendipitous rewards.

But the project perhaps closest to Jackson’s heart is his mission to beef up the availability of scholarships for Mailman students through the School’s Fund for Public Health Leadership. “It’s very important in our field,” he explains. “Most public health graduates aren’t going to be earning huge salaries, and a lot of our students are coming from places around the globe where there’s a tremendous need for well-trained professionals but little money to support their training.”

Currently the Fund supports more than 20 students a year, across departments and programs. One of them is Eva Rodriguez, a second-year MPH student from Texas, whose interests include family planning among Hispanics and program evaluation. “When I got into Columbia, I just had to go,” says Rodriguez, a “PopFam” student, but there was a “big gap” between what was provided through financial aid and the full cost of the program. Particularly hard was covering the costs of living in New York City. The Fund helped fill that gap.

The Fund is a point of pride for the School: 100 percent of donated money is dedicated to scholarship aid; most schools of public health allocate just 60 to 70 percent of similar donations to direct aid.

Jackson would like to help many more students like Rodriguez and has been working to expand the Fund. His generous support (including a matching gift challenge in 2011, which doubled the impact of alumni gifts to the Fund) led to a 17 percent increase in donations, enabling Mailman to award more scholarships at higher amounts. “The Fund is so important,” notes Jackson. “But it’s got to get much bigger. If we can get more of our alums—and we’re 11,000 strong—involved in even a small way, we really could make a much bigger impact.”

Among Jackson’s other enthusiasms as Alumni Association Board president is—surprise, surprise—expanding opportunities for Mailman graduates to network with one another. The Board is establishing an alumni mentoring committee that will work with the School’s Offices of Career Services and Alumni Affairs to connect students and alumni with career-related opportunities. The Board is also nurturing a new Alumni Association chapter in Washington, D.C., planning a networking event in Manhattan for young alumni in the early spring, and utilizing social media like LinkedIn to stay connected.

Says the gregarious Jackson, “It drives me crazy when people pass each other on the street or in the hall, unaware of shared passions or interests that could really be synergistic.” For Mailman alumni, those meetings of minds and passions could make a world of difference not only in career advancement but also in addressing some of the world’s biggest health challenges.

— Maria Andriella O’Brien
Champion for Science and Safety

OSHA chief David Michaels, PhD ’87, receives the 2012 Alumni Award for Excellence

Sometimes a book will change your life. For David Michaels, PhD ’87, that book was Causal Thinking in the Health Sciences. Reading it after he had graduated from City College of New York, Michaels decided he wanted to study the book’s subject, epidemiology. The next step was obvious: apply to Columbia University’s School of Public Health, where the book’s author, Mervyn Susser, MB, BCh, taught.

Soon enough he was studying with Susser and his wife, Zena Stein, MB, BCh, both professors of Epidemiology, and medical sociologist Jack Elinson, PhD—three “giants in the field of public health,” as Michaels puts it. After receiving his MPH, Michaels switched to Sociomedical Sciences. His dissertation, titled “What Becomes of the Brokenhearted” (after the 1966 Motown hit), looked at cardiovascular health among newspaper linotype workers who had been rendered obsolete by computer technology. It was the start of an enduring interest in the health of workers.

On June 7, 2012, Michaels returned to Columbia as Assistant Secretary of Labor for Occupational Safety and Health to receive the Mailman School’s Allan Rosenfield Alumni Award for Excellence, which honors the memory of the late Dean by recognizing alumni who have made exceptional contributions to the school and/or public health. In presenting the medal, Dean Linda P. Fried emphasized Michaels’ extraordinary public health achievements and dedication to the field.

“The reason we’re in public health is to understand the world so we can transform it and make the world a better place,” said Michaels. “Columbia is where I got the tools to do that.”

For Michaels, transforming the world began without delay. Even as he completed his degrees at Columbia, he worked full time at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx. In 1986, he founded the first epidemiology unit in a U.S. prison at Rikers Island. Then, as a member of the faculty at the City University of New York Medical School, he developed a mathematical model for estimating the number of children orphaned by HIV/AIDS. At the time, he says, “There were no programs for these kids.” The study was used by the CDC to allocate funding for those without sufficient healthcare coverage or financial resources to cope with HIV.

Bucking Entrenched Interests

It wasn’t long before the federal government tapped Michaels’ talents full time. In 1998, President Bill Clinton nominated him as Assistant Secretary for Environment, Safety, and Health at the Department of Energy, where he proceeded to orchestrate a historic compensation program for nuclear weapons workers exposed to hazardous materials. “It was a challenge,” says Michaels, explaining that the prevailing Cold War mentality created resistance to taking any responsibility, and security concerns meant that some of the hazardous materials couldn’t be identified. The program passed with bipartisan support. To date, it has paid more than $8 billion to affected workers and their families.

After leaving the Department of Energy, Michaels joined the faculty of George Washington University’s School of Public Health and Health Services, where he directed the Project on Scientific Knowledge and Public Policy. In 2008, he published the book Doubt Is Their Product, which described how chemical companies and others were adopting the tactics of the tobacco industry to smear science and weaken regulation. Another target of his criticism was the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, or OSHA, which, he said, needed an overhaul.

On the Job of Workplace Safety

In 2009, President Barack Obama offered him the chance to do just that. As Assistant Secretary of Labor and head of OSHA, Michaels has worked to broaden the agency’s role from ensuring that businesses are merely compliant with specific standards to supporting a holistic culture of workplace safety. “That involves giving workers a larger role in improving safety conditions,” he says.

The scope of OSHA’s work is vast; the agency’s jurisdiction includes 7 million workplaces and 130 million workers. On any given day, Michaels and his staff are working on health issues ranging from nail guns to nail salon chemicals. Over the summer, the agency rolled out a program called Heat Safety Summer to prevent heat injury among those working outdoors. The bilingual campaign employs simple guidelines—“Water. Rest. Shade”—that were first used to protect cleanup workers in the aftermath of the Gulf Coast oil spill. At the time, some questioned whether these measures were necessary, but OSHA is credited with preventing any deaths or serious illnesses resulting from the cleanup.

The Gulf Coast cleanup is just one in a long line of OSHA successes. Michaels likes to point out that in 1971, when the agency opened its doors, 38 workers were being killed on the job every day, but today that number is down to 13—even though the country’s workforce has nearly doubled. And OSHA’s achievements, he emphasizes, haven’t harmed businesses. “OSHA doesn’t kill jobs,” says this year’s Rosenfield Award winner. “OSHA stops jobs from killing workers.”

—BY TIM PAUL
Students, alumni, faculty, and staff share their vision of public health around the corner and around the world in our new photo-sharing community. Browse the full collection online and please add your photos to our collection at flickr.com/groups/1905006@N25/pool.
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At Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health, we are working to solve the biggest health challenges of our day.

In Africa, we are partnering with more than 20 countries to achieve the goal of an HIV-free generation. Here in the U.S., our work informs programs to prevent and treat PTSD in returning soldiers and policies to address chronic conditions like cancer, heart disease, and obesity—which rank among the leading causes of death and disability. In our hometown of New York, we guide city officials in creating policies that keep the air cleaner and families healthier.

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- Offer more scholarships to promising students
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