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Dr. James A. Koutsky 1940-1994

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In Memoriam

Dr. James A. Koutsky 1940–1994



James A. Koutsky, Professor in the Chemical Engineering Department at the University of Wisconsin, died on November 25, 1994. He was born on December 1, 1940, in Parma, Ohio, the son of Joseph and Marion Koutsky. Dr. Koutsky received B. S., M. S. degrees (both in Chemical Engineering) and a Ph.D. in Polymer Science, all from Case Western Reserve University.

Following recruitment at Case Western, and a visit to Madison, he was invited to join the Department of Chemical Engineering at the University of Wisconsin in Madison as an Assistant Professor, which he did in August, 1966. It was anticipated that he would strengthen and broaden the department's program in materials. After several months, still in his first year at Madison, he became seriously ill and did not respond quickly to treatment. An opportunity for total rest and a proper diet speeded his recovery and by the Fall he was back in Madison determined to carry on. He was promoted to Associate Professor in 1971. By that time he had developed new courses and laboratories, had published numerous research papers, had received Best Paper of the year and Best Presentation Awards from the Chemical Institute of Canada, had a Research Initiation Grant from the National Science Foundation and held a Young Engineering Professorship from the DuPont Company. Notable achievements, indeed, after a very difficult first year. During his tenure, he contributed greatly to the establishment of the Materials Laboratories and to building the Materials Science Program into one of the strongest interdisciplinary programs in the country.

He was promoted to Professor in 1978 and continued an active teaching and research program. He was well known for his work in adhesion and adhesives as well as in composite materials, particularly composites using cellulosic materials, and he collaborated extensively with the USDA Forest Products Laboratory in Madison.

To quote Professor James Dumesic, Chairman of the Chemical Engineering Department at the University of Wisconsin:

“I am in a unique position in that I was a student of Professor Jim Koutsky, I was his colleague, and I am Chairman of the Chemical Engineering Department.

In 1970, I was an undergraduate student and took a course from Professor Koutsky on Instrumental Analysis. This was a time when advances in chemical instrumentation were only beginning to be incorporated into chemical engineering programs. One technique that Jim was fascinated with, and presented in detail in his class, was the newly-emerging Mossbauer spectroscopy. Later, when I went on to graduate school, I jumped at the opportunity to use this technique that Professor Koutsky had taught to us. In fact, my research group continues to use this technique in our current work.

Based on my excitement with Professor Koutsky's course, I signed up for a project with him. The project I worked on dealt with the electroless deposition of copper on polymer surfaces. Professor Koutsky's enthusiasm for the work was contagious. Under his mentorship, I became hooked on research and he convinced me to go on to graduate school. In short, my interactions with him truly shaped my professional career.

As a colleague of his, I was always impressed with the commitment and dedication that he showed to his undergraduates. Furthermore, in his research, he was perhaps the most imaginative and optimistic person with whom I have ever worked. He was a tireless and enthusiastic teacher, a dedicated advisor to his students, and he was the faculty advisor for the Student Chapter of AIChE.”

A former student, Brian Mitchell, a recent Ph.D. graduate from Professor Koutsky's group, now on the Chemical Engineering faculty at Tulane University, said about him:

“Jim Koutsky was the eternal optimist. He was always 90–99.99% certain that something would work out. He loved to work and rest at his cabin in Spring Green. He cared a great deal about the Spring Green community and its development.

Jim loved his Pontiac Fiero. He had a soft spot for it, as it was one of the first production-level automobiles with molded plastic body parts—something which he had a hand in developing.

Jim was an excellent teacher. As his teaching assistant, I remember having frequent discussions about his students, and I was impressed with how much he knew about them as individuals. I've learned a great deal about classroom teaching from many people at Wisconsin, but all that I know about dealing with students on an individual basis I learned from Jim.

Jim cared.”

I knew Jim Koutsky for more than twenty years and succeeded him as President of the Adhesion Society in 1986. I must echo the thoughts of Brian Mitchell to say that I never knew a more pleasant, likeable, cheerful, enthusiastic, caring person. He always had a smile and a ready laugh. The last time I saw him was at the Adhesion Society Meeting in Orlando, Florida, in February, 1994. He happened to be in the area during the time of the meeting and dropped in to see and speak with old friends. He was his

usual bright and cheery self at that time and it is difficult to reconcile that memory with his passing.

His students, his colleagues, his friends and family will miss him greatly.

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(I am indebted to a number of Faculty at the University of Wisconsin, particularly Professor Stanley Langer, for providing me with help in preparing this tribute to Professor James A. Koutsky)