

Objective Lens: *In Memoriam: John Pichtel (1957-2026)*



The community of environmental scientists lost a dear colleague recently: Professor John Pichtel passed away on January 9, 2026. John retired from Ball State University in 2024 from what is now the School of Earth, Atmosphere, and Sustainability. During his 37-year career at BSU, John's research focused on developing improved methods for handling hazardous materials, from explosive residues in contaminated brownfield sites to the phytoremediation of heavy-metal contaminants in wetlands and other watershed environments.

Over his long and prolific career, John served as a visiting scholar in Italy, Scotland, Ireland, and Finland. John led several extensive field studies in environmental science and served as the director of the BSU Australia Center multiple times. His list of awards and honors is extensive, including two Fulbright Scholar awards, and his publications are staggering in both volume and quality. During his time at BSU, he published more than 80 papers and four books on topics ranging from environmental remediation to microplastics to weapons of mass destruction. In 2004, he helped create the Emergency Management and Homeland Security (EMHS) program at Ball State University, serving as its director for twenty years. His legacy is felt by many well beyond the campus community.

John and I worked together on many occasions, including my serving on the dissertation committee of his last doctoral student a few years ago. In earlier years, we collaborated on a project involving a metagenomics analysis of petroleum-contaminated soils, publishing together across disciplines. Over time, John became a trusted and respected colleague and friend. His approach to mentoring graduate students was something I always tried to emulate, knowing that no one was as gifted at

inspiring students as he was.

John was an inherently curious scholar and lifelong learner with diverse interests. Since his retirement, he and I had discussed his honing Italian and French language skills, mastering chess, traveling, planting wildflowers, and his progress on the novel he was writing. John was also an avid, quite talented painter, with a wide variety of themes in his works on canvas. During our last lunch together, a few weeks before his passing, he shared some of his paintings with me and, with the blessing of his wife, Theresa, I selected one to use as the cover on this issue of *Fine Focus*.

Featuring this acrylic pastoral scene, entitled *View from the Front Door*, on our cover seems an appropriate way for me to say, “Thank you, John,” for inspiring me as a scientist and mentor, and for so many great memories of working together all these years. I am reminded of a quote by Ernest Hemingway in his 1940 novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*: “Today is only one day in all the days that will ever be. But what will happen in all the other days that will ever come can depend on what you do today.” To me, this captures John’s legacy, which will live on in the countless students he mentored and the dozens of scientists with whom he collaborated.

John, this issue of *Fine Focus* is dedicated to you. It is fitting that multiple articles in this issue are applied and/or environmental microbiology studies, and I would like to think that you would be pleased to see this. Thank you for your friendship. You will be sorely missed.

-John McKillip, Managing Editor