

Obituaries LONG ISLAND

Richard B. Setlow dies; Brookhaven National Laboratory biophysicist was 94

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Richard B. Setlow of East Quogue, a biophysicist at Brookhaven National Laboratory internationally known for his research on DNA damage and repair, died April 6 of cardiac failure. He was 94. Photo Credit: Setlow family

Richard B. Setlow of East Quogue, a biophysicist at Brookhaven National Laboratory internationally known for his research on DNA damage and repair, died April 6 of cardiac failure. He was 94. Setlow, who came to Brookhaven in 1974, was best known for his work on the effects of ultraviolet light. In the 1960s and 1970s, Setlow and others discovered that the most important target for ultraviolet-light-induced damage in the cell is its DNA, and that cells have evolved different ways to repair that damage.

In the 1980s and 1990s, he and his colleagues reported that all ultraviolet wavelengths of sunlight -- not just short wavelengths -- could cause DNA damage that could lead to malignant melanoma.

Setlow was interested in how an understanding of physics could be applied to biology and was a pioneer in the emerging field of biophysics, said John Sutherland, chairman of the physics department at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina, who worked with him both at Brookhaven and Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee. He described Setlow as "incredibly upbeat and energetic."

"He was always interested in a range of scientific problems," he said.

Born in 1921 and raised in the Bronx, Setlow earned a degree in physics from Swarthmore College in 1941 and his PhD in physics from Yale in 1947. After teaching physics and biophysics at Yale from 1943 to 1961, he went to Oak Ridge, where he was a group leader in biophysics. He joined Brookhaven as a senior biophysicist with tenure.

From 1979 to 1987, he chaired the biology department and from 1986 to 1998 he was associate director for life sciences. In 2006, he became senior biophysicist emeritus, a post he held until his death.

Busy and passionate about research, Setlow was also an avid gardener and reader who loved to listen to Bach and Mozart, said his wife of 30 years, Neva. "He was a very humble, simple person and, although brilliant, kind and helpful to so many people," she said.

Other survivors include his children, Peter of Farmington, Connecticut, Michael of Baltimore, and Kate O'Brien of Orange, Connecticut; his stepchildren, Nicholas Delihias of Fort Myers, Florida, Marcia Hermus of Westhampton, and Cynthia DiGiacomo of Ridgefield, Connecticut; his sister Barbara Simon of St. Louis; six grandchildren; four step-grandchildren; and four great-grandchildren.