



Alan Berkman, 63, Activist Doctor, Dies

By DENNIS HEVESI
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Physician, fugitive, federal prisoner, clinician to the homeless, advocate for AIDS patients. epidemiologist: That was the arc of Alan Berkman's career.

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Poul Olson

Dr. Alan Berkman, right, discussing AIDS in Tanzania.



Associated Press

Dr. Berkman in 1985, accused of armed robbery and possessing explosives.

Dr. Berkman, a Vietnam-era radical who spent eight years in prison for armed robbery and possession of explosives and who later founded [Health GAP](#) — a leader in the coalition that helped make AIDS medication available to millions in the world's poorest countries — died in Manhattan on June 5. He was 63 and lived in Manhattan.

The cause was [cancer](#), with which he had struggled for nearly 20 years, said his wife, Dr. Barbara Zeller.

Eagle Scout; high school salutatorian; National Merit Scholar; honor student at Cornell, class of 1967; graduate of Columbia's College of Physicians and Surgeons, class of '71; medical director of the [Highbridge Woodycrest Center](#) in the Bronx, one of the first residences designed for AIDS patients; vice chairman of the epidemiology department at Columbia's Mailman School of Public Health since 2007: Those, too, are parts of Dr. Berkman's record, along with his years working in clinics in the South Bronx, Lower Manhattan and rural Alabama.

His life was laced with an activism that went to extremes, both in the tumult of the 1960s and '70s and into the Reagan years.

On May 23, 1985, Dr. Berkman and a friend were arrested outside Doylestown, Pa. In their car, federal agents found a pistol, a shotgun and keys to a garage that contained 100 pounds of dynamite. That day ended Dr. Berkman's two decades of participation in underground groups, among them the Students for a Democratic Society.

Four years earlier, on Oct. 20, 1981, an offshoot of the Weather Underground had attempted to rob a Brink's armored truck in Nyack, N.Y. In the shootout, two police officers and a guard died.

A year later, a federal grand jury investigating the case subpoenaed Dr. Berkman, who, a

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witness said, had treated one of the robbery defendants for a gunshot wound. When he was indicted and charged with being an accessory after the fact, Dr. Berkman jumped bail; he spent several years on the run.

While a fugitive, he entered a suburban Connecticut supermarket with a friend; they brandished revolvers, tied up the manager and stole \$21,480. Prosecutors later said the money was used to buy the explosives found in Doylestown and to support other radical groups. Dr. Berkman was sentenced to 10 years in prison; he served 8.

In 1994, when a reporter for The New York Times [interviewed Dr. Berkman at El Rio](#), a clinic in the South Bronx where he was treating drug-addicted parolees, the doctor, too, was on parole.

“There is plenty to learn from all the mistakes we made,” he said at the time, referring to his radical colleagues. “Power is corrupting. And the use of violence is a form of power. People motivated to stop the suffering of others have to be careful not be caught up in the same dynamics.”

He changed his dynamics, not his motivation. In 1995, he became a postdoctoral research fellow at Columbia, working with mentally ill homeless men who had AIDS.

In 1998 and '99, Dr. Berkman did research in South Africa, where AIDS was rampant. Upon returning to New York, he gathered a group of fellow AIDS activists and founded Health Global Access Project, known as Health GAP, which became one of the leading groups in the campaign to provide antiretroviral drugs to poor people around the world.

“He was one of the key figures in changing 20 years of U.S. trade policy on patents and medicine,” said James Love, director of [Knowledge Ecology International](#), one of the organizations that shared Dr. Berkman’s mission.

Health GAP, along with other advocacy groups, successfully lobbied the Clinton administration to change its opposition to compulsory licenses — orders by foreign governments requiring the owner of a drug patent to issue a license to a generic manufacturer, making the drug cheaper. Until that policy change, trade tariffs were often used against countries that issued compulsory licenses.

At the time, antiretroviral drugs cost about \$15,000 a year for a patient. Now, with some American manufacturers sharply reducing their prices, and with generic marketers, particularly in India, offering them at very low prices, the drugs can cost as little as \$150 a year.

In 1999, fewer than one million people, all in Western countries, had access to the H.I.V. medications they needed, said Jennifer Flynn, managing director of Health GAP. “Now,” she said, “there are close to four million, and more than half of them are in the poorest countries.”

Born in Brooklyn on Sept. 4, 1945, Alan Berkman was one of four sons of Samuel and Mona Osit Berkman. The family later moved to Middletown, N.Y., where his father owned a plumbing supply company. Besides Dr. Zeller, whom he married in 1975, Dr. Berkman is survived by his brothers, Jerry, Larry and Steven; his daughters, Sarah Zeller-Berkman and Harriet Clark; and a grandson.

Dr. Berkman learned he had a cancer of the lymph nodes while in prison and had recurring bouts with the disease.

In 1994, while treating parolees in the South Bronx, Dr. Berkman was asked how someone so committed to saving lives could have joined groups that were willing to plant bombs.

“I had seen pain in the communities I worked in,” he said, and “an increasing indifference” to that pain. “We became desperate and kept going further out on the limb.”

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He added, "Between going to prison and having cancer two times and knowing that death sits on my shoulder, I try to make every day matter."

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