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World-renowned scientist Kasha dies at 92



Michael Kasha at his home on Lake Bradford in 1988. / Democrat files

Written by [Gerald Ensley](#) Democrat senior writer

Michael Kasha, a Renaissance man who was arguably the most celebrated scientist in Florida State University history, died Wednesday.

Kasha, 92, had been in good health until 10 days ago when he developed an infection in reaction to antibiotics. He died at Tallahassee Memorial Hospital -- on a day that also happened to be the 90th birthday of his wife, Lilli.

Kasha, a native of New Jersey, earned a Ph.D. from California-Berkeley and worked on the Manhattan Project that created the atomic bomb during World War II. He joined the FSU chemistry department in 1951 and quickly became one of the nation's leading researchers in spectroscopy, the study of energy transfer among molecules.

In 1960, he won a \$3 million grant from the Atomic Energy Commission to create FSU's Institute of Molecular Biophysics. In 1963, he gained international attention for discovering a new property of oxygen.

That same year, became one of the first four FSU faculty members named to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

In 1979, he became the first Floridian named to the National Science Board, nominated by President Jimmy Carter to serve on the board that oversees the National Science Foundation.

Kasha taught actively into the early 2000s, when he became a professor emeritus and continued to mentor graduate students until a few years ago.

Though six Nobel Prize winners have served on FSU's faculty, Kasha was "homegrown," FSU President Eric Barron said Thursday.

"There is a tendency for individuals elected to the national academy to come from institutions that have already produced a lot of members," Barron said. "For (Kasha) to come from an institution where that had not been the history (in 1963) was huge. For him to be the first Floridian on the National Science Board was huge.

"Clearly, he was a person who reached the highest levels in science."

Kasha, who lived in a home on Lake Bradford, was a man of wide interests. He founded the FSU Sailing Club, was an avid photographer, did silk screening, collected bricks from old Tallahassee houses and was a community activist.

In 1963, he was the leader of several FSU faculty who reached into their own pockets to provide bail money for the dozens of FSU and Florida A&M students who were arrested for picketing Tallahassee's segregated theaters. In later years, he opposed pollution of Lake Bradford and three connecting lakes, the placement of undesirable municipal projects on the west and south sides of Tallahassee and the widening of Capital Circle near that chain of lakes.

"He was a world class scientist and a great humanitarian," said Ed Holifield, a longtime neighbor and friend. "He was just a kind and gentle man. You'd never know he was world famous."

Kasha's most notable extra-curricular interest was guitar design. In the early 1960s, he bought his then-eight-year-old son a guitar. Though he was not a musician, he immediately questioned its simple design. Over the next 30-plus years, he redesigned the guitar, changing particularly the interior chamber of acoustic guitars and the type of bridges used for the strings.

Despite a variety of relationships with guitar makers and national companies, Kasha's design never really caught on with musicians. But his work earned national attention, including a 1970s article in Rolling Stone magazine.

"I made it into the subculture, I guess," Kasha once shrugged.

The son of immigrants from the Ukraine – Kasha did not speak English until he went to school at age 7 – Kasha's chief attributes were curiosity and energy. After graduation from high school, he attended an engineering school for two years while also working at a pharmaceutical laboratory.

He then earned his bachelor's degree in chemistry at Michigan and a Ph.D. in two years at Cal-Berkeley.

FSU was his first full-time faculty post. He was renowned stimulating students (“It’s a thrill to see the dawning recognition of a new idea on a student,” he once said) and championing the importance of scientific research.

“I think the public cannot begin to realize what an enormous army of scientists we have at work in the United States and how it will change our lives,” Kasha said when Carter named him to the National Science Board in 1979. “What I want to see is not just the acquisition of knowledge but the development of new areas of research.”

Such enthusiasm was his stamp on FSU.

“He pursued things other people didn’t have time for; he was very creative, very intellectually curious,” said former FSU President Stanley Marshall. “He was a giant in so many ways and will be sorely missed.”

Kasha is survived by his wife of 65 years, Lilli, and his son, Nicolas, a California audio-location specialist, a daughter-in-law and two grandchildren.

No funeral or memorial arrangements have been announced.