

The New York Times

What Drove a Man to Set Himself on Fire in Brooklyn?

By: Annie Correal



Sometime before dawn on April 14, David Buckel left his small brick house on the edge of Prospect Park in Brooklyn, pulling a shopping cart. He passed the magnolia tree in the garden, the stone sculptures he had made. Then instead of walking to work, as he usually did on Saturdays, he went into the park.

He turned onto the road that loops around the meadows and ball fields, and after less than a quarter of a mile, he veered onto the grass. The place he chose would surprise people later, when they came with flowers: It wasn't a plaza or a spot where crowds gathered — just a stretch of patchy lawn on the shoulder of the road.

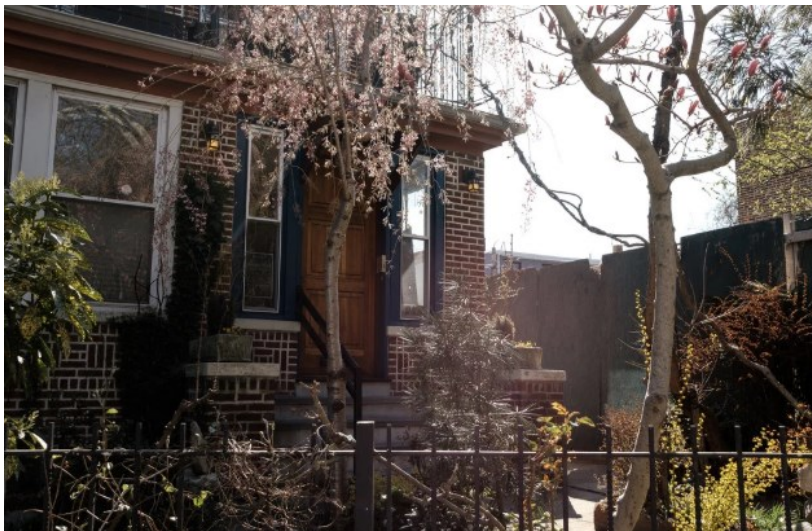
It's not clear how long Mr. Buckel stood there, or when he doused himself with gas, but at 5:55 a.m., as the light began to gather before sunrise, he sent an email to the news media explaining what he was about to do. The first 911 call came at 6:08 a.m.: man on fire.

When responders arrived, the flames were going out. Mr. Buckel, a prominent civil rights lawyer turned environmental advocate, was dead. He was 60.

It is impossible to know all the reasons a person commits suicide. Mr. Buckel suggested one: He was trying to call attention to pollution and global warming. "My early death by fossil fuel reflects what we are doing to ourselves," he wrote in his email.

His suicide is one of the few known cases of political self-immolation in the United States since the 1960s — when demonstrators set themselves on fire to protest the war in Vietnam — and perhaps the first one anywhere in the name of climate change.

But his political message still left Mr. Buckel's friends and family at a loss: Why would someone in his position resort to such a drastic measure to make his message heard? Why would someone who was committed to the quiet, daily work of making change — and who was notoriously private — stage a dramatic public suicide? He told no one of his plan, not his husband and partner of 34 years, Terry Kaelber, nor the lesbian couple with whom they raised their college-age daughter. He did not say goodbye to them.



News reports of his death featured photos of Mr. Buckel in his prime — a serious-looking lawyer who not long ago was at the forefront of the fight for marriage equality. A teacher who came across his body early that April morning described it as "mummified" by the fire.

"How do you get from that, to this?" said Adam Aronson, a lawyer and former colleague.

In the days after he died, Mr. Buckel was remembered for his work at Lambda Legal, a national organization that defends the civil rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. From about 1995 to 2008 he argued cases for L.G.B.T. youth and was a director of the marriage project, strategizing cases in Iowa and New Jersey.

Among his victories: *Nabozny v. Podlesny*, in which a federal court ruled for the first time that schools had an obligation to protect students from anti-gay bullying, and *Brandon v. County of Richardson*, where a sheriff was found liable for failing to protect a young transgender man murdered in Nebraska, an episode that inspired the 1999 film “Boys Don’t Cry.”

He brought an intense commitment to all that he did that could border on obsession. “David’s personality was such that anything he wanted to do, he would work really hard to understand it, more so than the average person,” said his husband, Mr. Kaelber.

Evan Wolfson worked with Mr. Buckel at Lambda Legal. “He was very passionate, very idealistic,” he said. Then he paused, searching for the right word. “But he could be absolute. He could be absolutist. He might sometimes take a position that I would challenge as not being realistic or strategic.”

When Mr. Buckel went to court, “he was impeccably color-coordinated and there was never a wrinkle or a crease in the wrong place,” Mr. Aronson said. His office was tidy to the point of seeming sterile. Before snapping a binder clip on a document, he folded a piece of paper over the pages, so it wouldn’t leave a mark, a former legal assistant remembered.

For the last decade, Mr. Buckel applied that intensity to running a compost site in Red Hook, on the Brooklyn waterfront.

He had grown up around soil and flowers in Batavia, N.Y. His mother worked in her family’s flower shop, Stroh’s Flowers; his father helped local farmers improve their operations. As a child, Mr. Buckel — the second-youngest of five boys — played in the family’s greenhouses and worked on an aunt’s chicken farm.

After Mr. Buckel left Lambda in late 2008, he was inspired by President Barack Obama’s call to volunteerism and took a composting class at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. He was captivated by the idea of community composting, which involves locals in the process of turning orange rinds and coffee grounds and flower stems into enriched soil, while reducing landfill waste and greenhouse gases.



At the time, a composter named Charlie Bayrer and an ad hoc group of volunteers were collecting food scraps and composting on some old baseball diamonds in Red Hook that had been turned into an urban farm. Mr. Buckel apprenticed himself to Mr. Bayrer after doing some grant-writing for the farm, “and he really latched onto it quickly,” Mr. Bayrer recalled. “I kind of came up with these basic parameters — X number of volunteers and tools, and then David created something on an entirely different level.”

In just a few years, Mr. Buckel created one of the largest compost sites in the country operated without heavy machinery — using only solar power, wind power and the labor of volunteers.

Brenda Platt, co-director of the Institute for Local Reliance, in Washington, D.C., visited Mr. Buckel’s site at Red Hook Community Farm in 2014 after meeting him at a composting convention. “It was meticulously organized,” she said. “The boots were lined up, hanging upside down — you know, like wine glasses? The tools were lined up.” The buckets were divided by color and stacked into pyramids.

At night, Mr. Buckel would lie in bed staring at the ceiling, he later told his assistant, picturing the compost piles in their various states of decomposition, planning which ones had to go where.

“His skill was instructing volunteers like a symphony conductor,” said Alexander Jagiello, who works for the NYC Compost Project hosted by the Queens Botanical Garden. “You had people showing up to turn a windrow — which is a compost pile — week after week.”



Once the city’s Department of Sanitation started delivering food scraps from Greenmarkets to composting sites as part of the NYC Compost Project, Mr. Buckel’s site was processing up to 225 tons of organic waste a year.

In a video he made in 2014, he wore cargo pants, a fabric hat and glasses that darken in the sun. In a soft, even voice, he went through his method. “To help with motivation,” he said, “we explain the importance of each toss of the pitchfork or shovel, because of the oxygen molecules attaching to the material.”

It’s about efficiency, he said, but also about the humans involved.

Mr. Buckel had been helping people from early on. After he graduated from the University of Rochester in 1980, he started working with hospice patients as a home health attendant — a job that seemed connected to events in his own life.

Two of his brothers had gone to Vietnam when he was a child and were injured. Around the time he

was finishing college, his mother learned she had lung cancer, and after a torturous but swift decline, she died. She was some months shy of 60.

“It just devastated the family,” said a cousin, John Marr. “The father just kind of drifted away after that. He got in his car and drove and drove.”

As their father spent ever longer periods in Florida, Mr. Buckel and his brothers — once known as the Buckel brothers, as close as could be — went their separate ways. When Mr. Buckel’s father died in his 80s, the family found their old photographs ruined in the trunk of his car.

Mr. Buckel changed his middle name after his mother died to Stroh, her maiden name. “He was always a more sensitive and gentle soul,” said a niece, Kristi Buckel Hébert.

He met his husband in Rochester in the mid-1980s, and after he earned his law degree from Cornell University in 1987, the two moved to New York. Eventually, they found the house off Prospect Park, in Windsor Terrace, where they moved with the two women with whom they raised their daughter, and Mr. Buckel grew his garden.

His colleague, Mr. Wolfson, befriended Mr. Buckel not long after he arrived in New York, when they were both Lambda Legal volunteers. After they joined Lambda’s staff, they worked closely on a case against the Boy Scouts. “He



was serious, in a thoughtful sense,” Mr. Wolfson said. “He was not grim or morose — we could laugh together and joke.”

But he remained guarded about his private life. Steven Goldstein, an activist who created Garden State Equality to press for same-sex marriage in New Jersey while Mr. Buckel pushed a case through the courts, did not even know for many years that Mr. Buckel had a child.

“We were an odd couple working for marriage equality, the talkative Jew and the buttoned-up WASP,” Mr. Goldstein said.

Despite Mr. Buckel’s reserve, Mr. Goldstein said, he retained a quixotic hopefulness that transformational changes were possible. When the New Jersey Supreme Court ruled in 2006 that same-sex couples were entitled to equal protections, and opened the way for civil unions, it was considered a major victory, but Mr. Buckel was disappointed: He wanted marriage, nothing less.

Mr. Buckel resigned from Lambda Legal a few years later, just as the movement for marriage equality was gaining momentum nationwide. Former colleagues remembered there being disagreements over direction and strategy at the time, and some said he may have left sooner than he would have wished.

In Mr. Buckel’s new role as compost guru, people sought him out. They came after growing disillusioned with corporate jobs, they came to him with ideas: What about carting compost on bikes? Compostable silverware? Mr. Jagiello, the Queens composter, came looking for guidance after working as a paralegal for the police department. “He was very willing to teach,” he said — with one condition, you had to shovel.



Mr. Buckel was perhaps most devoted to the volunteers who came from low-income backgrounds and were training for jobs. “I interview a lot of people for entry-level jobs in composting and I’m not exaggerating when I say I’ve heard the sentence ‘David Buckel changed my life’ dozens of times,” said Emily Bachman, the manager of the compost program for GrowNYC, an organization that provides sustainability services.

For the last three years, the person who worked most closely with Mr. Buckel was one of those volunteers, Domingo Morales, who first came to Red

Hook as part of a program for public housing youth, and eventually became his assistant and right-hand man. Until Mr. Buckel’s death, they worked together five days a week, Tuesday through Saturday.

On a recent morning, Mr. Morales stood on the compost site as a cold wind blew in off the water. “This is David’s baby,” said Mr. Morales, with an open, gaptoothed smile. He wore tall rubber boots, soil-flecked gloves and a wool cap. Mr. Buckel’s hat was still hanging from a nail on the compost shed.

“He was my mentor, my father figure,” Mr. Morales said.

In these years, Mr. Buckel pursued another longstanding interest — Buddhism. “He believed in things like being mindful, right action, thought and speech,” said his husband, Mr. Kaelber, noting they traveled to the Himalayas and Bhutan.

In his suicide letter, Mr. Buckel alluded to recent cases of self-immolation in Tibet. The letter was also laced through with phrases used by Buddhist monks to explain the spiritual roots of the protest tactic.

Mr. Buckel used to end every day with a routine: thanking volunteers for doing something good for the earth. But around February, that ritual changed. When volunteers circled, he shared grim news. “More than 90 percent of the world’s population breathes polluted air,” Mr. Morales recalled him saying. “The Arctic Circle is experiencing record-breaking temperatures.”

Later, as they left, Mr. Buckel said about climate change, “Nobody cares, why does nobody believe it?”

Two weeks before he died, Mr. Buckel seemed particularly agitated when he came to work one day. “I asked if he was stressed,” Mr. Morales said. “He dismissed it.” Then Mr. Buckel started sending him emails — lists of contacts, instructions for how to complete annual reports, forms to be turned over to officials. He began labeling everything on the site, every switch and key, and showed him how to work the solar panels, the lights.

“What, you going to retire on me?” Mr. Morales remembered saying. “Naw, you’re stuck with me forever.” In those days, the news had broke that Scott Pruitt, the head of the Environmental Protection Agency under President Trump, wanted to end Obama-era standards on vehicle emissions, a devastating blow to anyone fighting climate change.

If the agency rolled back the rules on emissions, it would wipe out all the efforts made by people like Mr. Buckel — walking to work, processing hundreds of tons of food waste without a drop of gas.

Mr. Buckel’s husband and the women with whom they lived said he had been increasingly distressed over the environment and the state of the national debate, but had not been ill or shown signs of depression. To honor his wishes, they said in brief telephone interviews that they wanted to focus on the message he left behind.

Mr. Buckel’s suicide letter was a few pages long and touched on many subjects, revealing a man who had grown deeply despondent. But it made his cause clear: “Pollution ravages our planet,” he wrote. “Most humans on the planet now breathe air made unhealthy by fossil fuels, and many die early deaths as a result.”

He concluded: “Here is a hope that giving a life might bring some attention to the need for expanded action.”



The last time that Mr. Morales saw him, Mr. Buckel looked exhausted. The next morning he said nothing to his family before leaving home.

Later, when Mr. Kaelber was asked what had precipitated his husband’s suicide, he said, “I think a lot of it, unfortunately, was all that’s going on with the Trump administration and the rollback by Pruitt.”

The day Mr. Buckel died, Mr. Morales received a text from him at 5:25 a.m. saying he wouldn’t be at work. At 5:55 a.m., he got the letter Mr. Buckel emailed to several news organizations. He was arriving at the Red Hook site

and dismissed it at first, taking it for one of the news stories they’d exchange.

“I sent him a text at 6:40 saying, ‘Please tell me that email is just a joke.’”

Above Mr. Buckel’s letter, there was a note. “I apologize for leaving this world early and leaving you with some big challenges to tackle,” it said. “You are ready. I am so proud of you and what you have accomplished, both in your professional and your personal life. It was an honor and a pleasure to serve the Earth with you.”

Mr. Morales, not wanting to believe what he had read, showed it to a few other workers later that morning. He did a Google search for “self-immolation.”

“It popped up — Prospect Park,” he said. “We just dropped to the ground.”

Mr. Buckel chose to die not before thousands, but alone. He chose to do it at an early hour, perhaps so the sight of a burning man would be less likely to traumatize children, or be caught on video.

Even the location, that forgettable strip of grass just off the road, seemed intended to disrupt life as little as possible. “I apologize to you for the mess,” he wrote in a note to the police, which was found with his letter in the shopping cart. He had stapled his business card to the letter, and left his identification on a lanyard nearby, to remove any doubt.

He kept his cellphone with him, which was found in melted pieces by his body, along with a knife and some keys.

Among the many unanswered questions about the death of David Buckel was why he had a folding shopping cart with him. There was no fuel canister in it, nothing but an empty black plastic bag — the kind he and Mr. Morales filled with the rich new soil made on their compost site.

The earth around Mr. Buckel was burned in a nearly perfect circle. The police said the ground was too scorched to tell, but it is possible that when he went to Prospect Park that day, he took some soil with him, hauling it in the cart. It is possible Mr. Buckel’s last moments were spent spreading it out, making a ring around himself, so the flames wouldn’t spread.

[Click here](#) to read the original article from The New York Times.