

Cincinnati professor nominated for Nobel dies

AMANDA LEE MYERS - Associated Press - Associated Press

Elwood Jensen, an award-winning University of Cincinnati professor nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for work that opened the door to advances in fighting cancer, has died of pneumonia. He was 92.

Jensen died Sunday, the university announced Thursday. He was nominated multiple times for the Nobel Prize for his discovery of hormone receptors while at the University of Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s.

Back then, Jensen focused on the impact breast tissue had on estrogen, whereas most other researchers were looking at how the hormone influenced tissue. At the time, the standard treatment for breast cancer was to take out the ovaries or adrenal glands, but after creating a way to radioactively tag estrogen, Jensen found that only a third of breast tumors carry estrogen receptors.

The discovery allows doctors today to identify which patients will respond to anti-estrogen therapy and which need chemotherapy or radiation. The ground-breaking finding has helped doctors treat breast, thyroid and prostate cancer.

Jensen was repeatedly nominated for the Nobel Prize and won dozens of awards for his work, including a Lasker Award for Basic Medical Research, a prize that is considered America's Nobel.

Dr. Sohaib Khan, a professor of cancer biology at Cincinnati and a friend of Jensen's, said Jensen's greatest disappointment in life was not winning the Nobel — he even brought it up during their last conversation about a week before his death.

"He was talking about how fortunate he was to live a life like he has," Khan said. "But one qualm he had was that he did not get the Nobel Prize. He felt pretty strongly that he really deserved it, and most people in the field think exactly the same way."

Nobel Prizes are not awarded post-humously.

Khan called Jensen's work "monumental" and described the man as down-to-earth, humble, funny and always ready to tell an old story from his boxing days in college or when he climbed the 14,690-foot Matterhorn in the Alps in 1947.

Jensen also worked to encourage young people to study science and stick with it, including current University of Cincinnati President Santa Ono.

The two first met in 1980 when Elwood — by then already an icon in his field — was teaching at the University of Chicago and Ono was a freshman.

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Ono said that even though he wasn't his student, Elwood "was warm and gracious," spent more than an hour speaking to him about his interest in medical research and offered him advice he'll never forget.

"I will forever be grateful for his encouragement of my career," Ono said in a statement.

Jensen grew up in Springfield in western Ohio and graduated from Wittenberg College. He got his doctorate in organic chemistry at the University of Chicago.

For the past 10 years, Jensen was a professor at the University of Cincinnati's department of cell biology, neurobiology and anatomy. He had been teaching at the university since 2002 after leaving the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, Sweden, where he was the Nobel visiting professor.

He is survived by his wife and two grown children, a daughter living in New Hampshire and a son living in Ecuador.

A memorial service is tentatively set for Jan. 10 at the university's Vontz Center for Molecular Studies.

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