

William D. Willis, Jr., M.D., Ph.D. (1934-2015)

After a long and very productive research career, William Darrell “Bill” Willis, Jr MD, PhD, 81, passed away on Tuesday, September 15, 2015 at the University of Texas Medical Branch Hospital, Galveston, Texas. He was born July 19, 1934 in Dallas, Texas. He was preceded in death by his wife Jean Schini Willis, parents Dorcas Frances Chamberlain Willis and William Darrell Willis. Survived by son Thomas D. Willis, grandchildren Trenton D. Willis and Skyler E. Willis, sister Mary Willis Clayton of Tallahassee, FL, and brother James E. Willis of Baton Rouge, LA.

He obtained a B.S. (Zoology) and B.A. (English) from Texas A&M University in 1956. In 1960 he received his M.D. degree from the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School. He earned his Ph.D. in Physiology in 1963 under Sir John Eccles at the Australian National University. Thereafter, he worked in Italy as a postdoctoral research fellow under Professor G. Moruzzi at the Istituto di Fisiologia, University of Pisa.

Dr. Willis returned to UT Southwestern Medical School in Dallas to join the staff as an Assistant Professor of Anatomy in 1963. One year later he became Professor and Chairman of the Anatomy Department at Southwestern. While at Southwestern, he authored one of the first textbooks covering the then new field of Neuroscience with co-author Robert Grossman, MD.

Dr. Willis joined the staff of the Marine Biomedical Institute (MBI) located on the campus of UTMB, Galveston in 1970 as Chief of the Comparative Neurobiology Division. He became the director of MBI in 1978, following in the footsteps of Dr. Stewart Wolf. In 1986 he became Professor and Chairman of the Department of Anatomy & Neurosciences and was named the Ashbel Smith Professor (1986-1994). From 1994 until he retired in 2007, he held the Cecil H. and Ida M. Green Chair in Marine Sciences and was the current holder of the Cecil H. and Ida M. Green Distinguished Chair in Neuroscience. He was Professor Emeritus in his beloved department, Neuroscience and Cell Biology at UTMB.

Professionally, Dr. Willis was a “giant” in the field of Neuroscience and in particular, the field of Pain Research. During his research career, he was elected president of several major scientific societies including the Society for Neuroscience, The American Pain Society and the Cajal Club. He did pioneering work, studying pain processing and much of the information known today about the major pain pathway carrying pain impulses from the spinal cord to brain (spinothalamic tract) came from the work of Bill Willis and his trainees. He was also a pioneer in elucidating the process of central sensitization, a phenomenon that underlies many chronic pain states.

His research program was funded by NIH throughout his entire career. He was also the editor-in-chief of two major scientific journals and on the editorial board of 10 others. In his life’s work, he contributed to 311 journal articles, 103 book or symposium chapters and contributed to 12 textbooks. In 2002, he was named by the Institute of Scientific Information (ISI) as one of the world’s most highly cited authors (top 0.5% of all publishing authors).

The above speaks to his brilliance and industry, but doesn't convey that he was a humble, kind and generous man. One of his greatest legacies is his trainees. He continually had a lab full of young scientists eager to learn. He loved this facet of his career. He mentored 22 graduate students over his career and trained 73 postdoctoral fellows, several of which went on to become chairs of departments or directors of institutes and many more who became productive faculty not only at various universities around the United States, but throughout the world. Some of his happiest time was when he was in the lab doing late night experiments with his students and postdocs.

His photographic memory made him a walking encyclopedia. He loved teaching and the students loved him. He received nine teaching awards including the Jimmy Doyles Dickens Memorial Faculty Award, from the UTMB School of Medicine (1999) and the Lifetime Achievement Award for Contributions to the Educational Missions of the UTMB Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences (2008).

No matter his age, he remained young at heart, always willing to laugh at himself and happy to don any costume handed to him at Halloween or Christmas parties. He was always a good sport. Dr. Willis was a master at multi-tasking; he excelled as the chairman of a department, the director of an institute, head of a 20-person lab and first baseman on the department softball team, but he was never flustered, never late for a meeting, never seemed over-worked and always had time to sit down for a chat with a student or colleague. He was a gentleman and a scholar in the truest sense of the word.

A memorial and celebration of his life will be held at the Moody Gardens Hotel, 9th Floor Viewfinders Room, on Monday, September 21, 2015. Visitation at 5:30 p.m., service at 6:30 p.m. Memorial donations may be made to the William D. Willis and Jean C. Willis Research Endowment in Neuroscience Fund, UTMB Development Office, 301 University Blvd, Galveston TX, 77555-0148 or online at www.utmb.edu, by clicking on Contribute, then on Give Now; under gift information, you will need to type in the name of the fund in the box provided as it does not pull up in the list. The family wishes to thank his loving caregivers, Denise Broker and Barbara Anastasiadis for their decades of friendship and devotion.