



William Lee Smith Jr.

October 28, 1945 - October 12, 2024

With heavy hearts, the Family announces the passing of William "Bill" Smith on the morning of Saturday, October 12, 2024. Bill died peacefully, surrounded by his wife Andrea, his children Shannon, Tyler, and Zachary, his sister Cam, and his beloved grandchildren.

Bill was a man of exceptional intellect, boundless curiosity, and humility. Those fortunate enough to know him admired his sharp wit, balanced perspective, and rare ability to connect deeply through written word, photography, and authentic human interactions. Though calm and measured in most things—except perhaps the occasional errant golf shot—he was profoundly thoughtful, decisive, and driven by a passion for uncovering the mysteries of the natural world through science.

Born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Bill was raised in Park Ridge, Illinois, alongside his younger sisters Donna and Cam. His formative years were shaped by his adoring mother, Jean, and his strong-minded father, Bill Sr. In high school, his family relocated to Fort Collins, Colorado, where he graduated in 1963 as a Fort Collins High School Lambkin. Summers on his father's ranch near Granby, Colorado, introduced him to the rigors of ranching, which cultivated a steadfast work ethic that would later fuel his academic and professional pursuits.

Bill attended the University of Colorado, Boulder, where he initially played baseball and quickly discovered his knack for chemistry. Encouraged by mentors, he pursued a Ph.D. in biochemistry at the University of Michigan, followed by postdoctoral research at the University of California, Berkeley. His academic journey led him to teaching and research positions at Michigan State University (1975-2003) and later the University of Michigan (2003-2015). He served as chair in both biochemistry departments. Bill contributed, in his estimation, more than 60,000 hours to his field over his distinguished career. He served as the Associate Editor for the Journal of Biochemistry, was a member of the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Council and was co-editor in chief for the Journal of Lipid Research. He also received numerous accolades including the Avanti Award in Lipids, Bayer Corporate Senior Aspiring Award, the Michigan State Scientist of the Year Award, the ASBMB William C Rose Award for exemplary contributions to education and The University of Michigan Distinguished Faculty Lectureship Award in Biomedical Research. While Bill's achievements were notable, he will be most remembered in his field for his guidance, friendship, teamwork, and advocacy for his students, faculty, colleagues and administration.

Equally important was his role as a husband and father. He met Andrea Johnson while living in the same apartment building on Ann Street in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Enchanted by her work ethic, trustworthiness and commitment, Bill quickly fell in love. They married on December 21, 1968, and spent 55 devoted years together, building a life of love, resilience, and partnership.

Bill was forever grateful that Andrea's ability to manage the domestic front allowed him the time necessary to build his career. Together, they raised three children, Shannon (1973), Tyler (1975) and Zachary (1979), in Okemos, Michigan, instilling in them the values of family, hard work, education, frugality, and healthy eating.

When his children were young, Bill arrived home at five o'clock for family dinners and then played games of street tennis, driveway basketball and backyard baseball followed by helping with baths and bedtime stories. He often returned to the laboratory or worked into the night by the fireplace. As the children grew older, he became the spectator to their sports and school activities, ever a proud father. Summers brought traditional family trips to his parents and family in Colorado experiencing his former ranch life, and to Andrea's parents' cottage on Little Glen Lake in Leelanau Peninsula surrounded by water sports, tennis, trampoline, sand dunes, and jeeping. Later, travel expanded to various parts of the country and one-on-one travels with his grown children to Europe. Bill was pleased that Shannon, Tyler and Zachary all completed college degrees, established professional careers, married into loving families, and enjoy being parents themselves. The grandchildren created a new beginning for Bill and based on quality time he spent, and the collections of photographs he took, each grandchild filled a special place in his heart.

After retiring in 2015, Bill and Andrea embraced the warmth of Tucson, Arizona, spending winters in the Oro Valley, Sun City community. They found joy in golf, dinner parties, performances, and even e-bike rides as mobility became more challenging for Bill. Ever the scholar, Bill delved into genealogy research and penned his reflections, documenting the legacy he would leave behind.

In his final 15 years, Bill faced a complex health prognosis of heart failure with courage and humor. His deep understanding of his medical challenges allowed him to manage his condition with remarkable fortitude until the end. In his last days, he shared heartfelt, teary goodbyes with his family and found the strength to call numerous close friends, neighbors and colleagues to

express his gratitude. His passing was marked by a profound stillness and peace, a testament to the depth of his character and the love he cultivated throughout his life.

Bill leaves behind his wife Andrea Kay Smith; his children Shannon Elise McGinnis (Gray), Tyler Lee Smith (Rosy), and William Zachary Smith (Niru); his sisters, Donna Jean Flemming (Jim), and Caroline Sue Olofson, and his half sisters, Mary Smith (Dan) and Darcee Muchmore (James); his nine grandchildren, Faith, Daisy, William, David, Cole, Elyse, Jake, Niam, and Rajai and a vast network of extended family, friends, colleagues, and students. He follows his late parents, William Lee Smith Sr. and Martha Jean Vandervoort.

In Bill's memory, we honor his contributions in education, celebrate his life, and carry forward his love for discovery, family, and the infinite wonders of the universe. We say goodbye to the foundation of our family, a pillar of the scientific community, and a man who made a positive and lasting impact in the world.

Tribute Wall

RB

“ Although Bill and I were close colleagues for a few years he was someone that I seemed to have known much longer and who was a friend for life, even though we would only see each other very occasionally.

Bill was an admirable man, enormously talented as a scientist, blessed with an uncommon amount of common sense seasoned with wry humor and a firm grasp of human nature. I really liked him. and will miss knowing he is there.

Bob Barker

Robert Barker - March 20, 2025 at 06:42 PM

AG

“ *In Memoriam article on Bill from the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology (ASBMB): <https://www.asbmb.org/asbmb-today/people/102124/in-memoriam-william-smith>*

Arlyn Garcia-Perez - November 10, 2024 at 04:12 AM

TR

“ I met Bill in the summer of 1978 while working on my undergraduate research project. As I was completing my Biochemistry degree and unsure of my next steps, Bill offered me a lab technician position. He often said that to become a Rich and Famous Biochemist, you need to “be lucky and have good timing,” and I felt fortunate to have crossed paths with him.

With his encouragement, I applied to the Master’s program and, thanks to him, was accepted. My time as a graduate student in Bill’s lab was one of the most rewarding periods of my life. He was demanding yet supportive, always showing genuine interest in his students’ lives. He had a remarkable ability to bring out the best in us, and in many ways, he became like a second father to me. I credit him with much of my success.

I cherish many memories, including a long-distance run we took through the farmland around MSU. In a moment of spontaneity, we decided to cut across a field, only to spot a massive bull at the same time it spotted us. We sprinted back to safety just in time! Bill laughed afterward, saying he had a great time and looked forward to running again.

I was deeply saddened to hear of Bill’s passing. My heartfelt condolences go out to Andrea and his family. Rest in peace, Bill.

Tom Rollins MS 1981

Tom Rollins - October 28, 2024 at 05:17 PM

FG

“ I met Bill in the Fall of 1976 shortly after I started my graduate work at MSU. I was playing in a “get to know everyone” softball game, was standing on first base and Bill was coaching third. The next batter smacked one into right field, and after rounding second and hustling into third, Bill looked right at me and said, “I’m glad you joined the program because now I’m not the slowest guy in the department.” Wow, trash talked by a professor. Bill was cheeky and quick-witted, and I joined his lab in the Spring of 1977.

Bill was working towards tenure, we were working towards our degrees, and it was an exciting time to be in his lab. High energy and high expectations. Bill recognized that for me to improve I had to be nudged out of my comfort zone. He didn’t coddle his graduate students, and I was forced to address my lack of self-awareness and undisciplined experimentation. It was tough love that helped me grow as a person and scientist. I like to think a bit of Bill’s abundant talent and determination rubbed off on all of us that were lucky enough to be mentored by him.

There were many light moments as well. Bill doing his Gene Shalit imitation at the department Christmas party (Dr. Wilson’s Bob Newhartesque skit was exceptional as well). Bill wryly telling me not to worry, we had money to burn, when I was talking to him and dropped a vial of radioactive arachidonic acid on the floor. And my favorite. Several years into my stint in Bill’s lab, I was preparing dialysis tubing in boiling water over a Bunsen burner and I forgot about it. Walking into the lab the next morning, Bill greeted me and asked what I had for breakfast. Before I could respond, he suggested, “Fried dialysis tubing?”

Time endows us with perspective, and looking back forty-eight years later, I know someone as smart, funny, and creative as Bill doesn’t grace our lives very often. It was a blessing to have known him.

O Captain. My Captain. Rest in peace.

Frank Grenier, Ph.D., 1981
Libertyville, Illinois

Frank Grenier - October 27, 2024 at 09:50 AM

DD

“ As one of his first graduate students, Bill Smith was my mentor for my PhD in Biochemistry at Michigan State University from 1977-82. Over the years he became my collaborator, colleague and close friend. Bill was an outstanding biochemist, known for his scientific intellect, his ability to teach and communicate science, and for his wry sense of humor. His leadership and interpersonal skills led him to become chair of the Departments of Biochemistry at both MSU and UM. His work on prostaglandin biosynthesis, and the mechanisms of action of aspirin, ibuprofen and other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory (NSAIDs) was both groundbreaking and consequential. Everyone reading this posting has been directly or indirectly affected by Bill’s work. NSAIDs remain the most widely used and effective class of drugs worldwide. Working with Bill was the most fortunate opportunity in my life. He taught me (and dozens of others) to write and think critically and is responsible for what success I have had in my own career. I will miss his wisdom and wit.

For those of you who would like to learn more about Bill, his self-deferential humility, and the scope and depth of his prodigious scientific career, there is no better source than this open access retrospective he wrote shortly after his retirement for the Journal of Biological Chemistry where he was an editor and contributor for many decades:

*Journal of Biological Chemistry: Reflections Volume 294, Issue 6
February 2019*

“A seven-step plan for becoming a moderately rich and famous biochemist”

[https://www.jbc.org/article/S0021-9258\(20\)36828-9/fulltext](https://www.jbc.org/article/S0021-9258(20)36828-9/fulltext)

David DeWitt, Ph.D., Okemos, MI.

David DeWitt - October 23, 2024 at 10:40 AM

AG

“ I was the first female Ph.D. student in Bill’s lab, graduating in 1984. As such, I was quite a challenge for Bill, not only because he wasn’t used to women as mentees, but also because I was most definitely an out-of-the-box sample: I arrived to the Dept of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at MSU with my B.S. from MIT, coming originally from Puerto Rico, had never lived in the Midwest, and was certainly no wall flower. So the 4 years I worked in Bill’s lab proved quite the learning experience for us both! In the end, I believe a relationship of mutual respect and admiration was maintained for 40+ years, and although we had not met in person for the last 27 years, we corresponded regularly. So I kept up with Bill’s very active life, his growing family, the whereabouts of his children and grandchildren, his wonderful memories published in JBC, his flying lessons, his passion for golf, and so many other things, including our ever more in-common political views. But true to form and the nature of our relationship, Bill never mentioned the last battle he had been fighting for 4-5 years and his premature passing came as a shocking surprise. The memories remain, even of our very hard times and arguments in the lab, because ultimately we both rose above them to find compassion and understanding for one another. I will always cherish the memories and the indelible impact Bill, William Lee Smith, had not only on my scientific path but on my life overall. I attach two dear photos from the day of my Ph.D. thesis defense, one with Bill watching my presentation (just before his truly unforgettable closing remarks 😭), and after back in the lab celebrating I had passed! Rest in peace, dear Bill, until we meet again through our Lord Jesus Christ!

Arlyn Garcia-Perez, Ph.D., North Bethesda, Maryland



Arlyn Garcia-Perez - October 17, 2024 at 12:56 PM