

Dr. William Iyeo Higuchi

March 16, 1931 ~ May 10, 2024

William Iyeo Higuchi, a research pioneer in the pharmaceutical sciences at the universities of Michigan and Utah, died Friday, May 10, at his home in Salt Lake City, Utah. He was 93.

Born in San Jose, California, on March 16, 1931, Bill was the son of immigrants from the southern Japanese island of Kyushu. The family owned a 14.25-acre farm on which they grew raspberries and other fruit.

The family was forced to sell the farm following the attack by the Imperial Japanese government on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941. Bill remembered his mother burning Japanese memorabilia to prevent suspicion of divided loyalties at the start of the U.S. participation in World War II.

Bill, his parents, an older brother and his younger sister were sent first to the Santa Anita Assembly Center in Arcadia, Calif., and then to the Heart Mountain, Wyo., incarceration camp in September 1942. He would spend the next three years at Heart Mountain, where he excelled in school and met his future wife, Setsuko Saito, in the camp's makeshift high school.

After the war, Bill returned to San Jose with his parents and sister, Emily. He graduated from San Jose High School and San Jose State University.

While completing his Ph.D. in physical chemistry at the University of California at Berkeley, he encountered Setsuko Saito, his former Heart Mountain classmate. The couple soon began dating and married in 1956. They would have four children — Kenneth, who died in 1986, Shirley Ann, Robert and John.

Setsuko Saito Higuchi died in April 2005 at the age of 74.

In 1959, Bill joined the faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where his older brother Takeru was a faculty member. He moved to the University of Michigan in 1962.

Bill's reputation as an innovator in pharmaceutical sciences grew during his tenure at Michigan, leading to his recruitment to be the head of the Department of Pharmaceutics and Pharmaceutical Chemistry at the University of Utah in 1982.

While at both universities, Bill mentored hundreds of doctoral students from around the world. This support would lead to him being awarded the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold Ray with Neck Ribbon, from the Japanese government in 2012.

Bill received dozens of honors for his work in pharmaceutical sciences, including the Ebert Prize, the highest honor bestowed by the American Pharmaceutical Association. He received honorary doctorate degrees from the University of Michigan, where there is an endowed chair in pharmaceutical sciences bearing his name, and the University of Utah in 2023.

Along with his work in academia, Bill founded or cofounded four pharmaceutical companies — TheraTech, Lipocine, Spriasoand Aciont. TheraTech is now part of international pharmaceutical giant Abbvie, while Lipocine is traded on the Nasdaq exchange.

In his later years, Bill was an active and generous supporter of the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation, which operates a museum and conference center on the site of where Higuchi, his wife, and 14,000 other Japanese Americans were unjustly imprisoned during World War II. His daughter, Shirley Ann, is now chair of the foundation.

Bill was predeceased by his wife Setsuko and his oldest son, Kenneth. Surviving family members include his daughterShirley Ann (Ray Locker), sons Robert (Rebecca Schmitt) and John, grandchildren William (Angeline) Collier and Adele (Derek) Collier Dodd, Tace (Matt Rutledge) and Rayna Higuchi, two great grandchildren, Amelia and William Collier, soon-to-be-born great granddaughter Dodd, sister Emily Higuchi Filling, sister in law Kathleen Saito Yuille, and multiple nieces and nephews.

Plans for a memorial service will be announced in the future.

The family requests that in lieu of flowers koden or memorials be made in his memory to the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation, 1539 Road 19, Powell, WY 82435 or at heartmountain.org.