Michael Joseph Smith



JUNE 8, 2022

Michael Joseph Smith, born to James Eldyn Smith and Mary Bernadette Smith on January 20, 1939 in Bay City, Michigan, passed away on Wednesday, June 8, 2022 in New Westminster, British Columbia. As a child, Mike survived a serious illness with the support of family, who bolstered his spirits with a continual supply of books that stoked his life-long love of learning, particularly on the subject of world history. He graduated from St. Anthony's High School in Long Beach, California in 1957 and St. Mary's College of California in 1963. Mike joined the U.S. Army shortly thereafter and served for two years, including time at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, Washington, DC, the SEATO Medical Research Lab, Bangkok, Thailand, and the U.S. Naval School of Aviation Medicine, Pensacola, Florida. He was awarded the U.S. Army Commendation Medal in 1965.

Pursuing his insatiable curiosity about the natural world, Mike earned his Ph.D. in Zoology from the University of British Columbia in 1969, did post-doctoral research and taught at the California Institute of Technology and the University of Nebraska, and eventually took a position on the faculty of Simon Fraser University in 1976. His career was characterized by dedication to his students. He cared deeply about providing them with every opportunity to grow and reach their full potential. Mike retired from SFU having served as both Chair of the Department of Biological Sciences and the inaugural Chair of the Department of Molecular Biology and Biochemistry. Still exploring in his final four years as a professor, Mike taught pre-medical students at Weill Cornell Medicine in Doha, Qatar.

Mike met Margaret at Simon Fraser University and they married in 1978. Surviving family are his children, Jennifer (Robert) and James (Sara), his newly arrived grandson and namesake, Michael, his sister, Mary Kathleen, and many nieces and nephews. He was predeceased by his four older brothers, all strong characters in their own rights whom he admired for their unique strengths: Thomas, Gerald, Richard and Patrick. The decades-long debate about who among them made the best spaghetti sauce will never be resolved.

The world feels dimmer without Mike's wide grin, heartfelt stories, and thunderous sneeze. He inspired others through his core values of learning, integrity and service to others. We will remember him on every road trip, in each observed miracle of nature, and whenever we discuss questions of social justice.

No service is planned at this time. In lieu of flowers, please consider donations to:

- In Canada: Nature Conservancy of Canada
- In the United States: St. Mary's College of California, Spirit of Saint Mary's Annual Scholarship

Messages of Condolence

My condolences. I knew Mike briefly while we were both at Cornell in Doha.

— Alice Burnett

Dear Margaret, Jennifer, James and all dear family,

My deepest condolences for Mike's lost.

Certainly Mike has left a great mark on my life as a student, which permeated my professional and personal life. He is in my heart and now with my mom's entering his 96 years of age, we remember him constantly in our memories.

You are bless for being part of his life. Rest in peace Mike Smith

I send comforting hugs to all of you in these moments of loss.

Sincerely,
Irene Barriga

— Irene Barriga

Mike was a great man and teacher. I was privileged to know him both as a student and brother-in-law. I will always remember the first time I met him in his developmental biology class and he warned us about the dangers of highlighters! he had a wry since of humour and I will miss him. Sending love to his family.

— Steve Gordon

A message to my Brother-in-Law, Michael Joseph Smith: I was 12 years old when you and Margaret got together. You were like an Uncle to me. Thank you for your non-judgmental kindness to a kid that didn't always have her act together. I was always welcome to your home and table and felt comfortable and accepted there. Later in life I married Steve, one of your students from SFU. We are still friends with former students Steve met in your first year Biology class. Your reach was far and encompassed many. I will always remember your positive and easygoing nature, storytelling abilities, and dedication to family. We miss you Mike. Rest in Peace.

— Astrid Gordon

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Sincerely,
Irene Barriga

— Irene Barriga

I am very sorry to hear of your family’s loss. I heard a bit about Michael through Jennifer, and I know he will be sorely missed. He will live on through his children and now grandchild. Sending you thoughts and prayers,

The McPhail family.

— Tara McPhail

I met Mike when I was a new faculty member at SFU in 2000. He inspired me. Mike was one of those slightly curmudgeonly old faculty members that dotted the landscape when I first started, who could tell this new kid the history, the good and bad, the opportunities. He would get irritated at things that were set up in a way he found inefficient or silly. He laughed easily. He challenged others to do better. Mike visited when he was in the middle of his work in Qatar, by which time I was beginning a term as Chair of Biology. He hadn't changed; funny, passionate, challenging. I benefitted from knowing him. All my best wishes are with his family--please know that he touched and influenced many people.

— Elizabeth Elle

Dear Margaret, Jennifer and James,
Mike was a wonderful mentor. He encouraged me to ask my own independent research question as an undergraduate ISS student, which was unusual and which I appreciated very much. He was always so refreshingly straightforward, with a great sense of humour.
I never took a course from Mike, so he used to tease me by saying "How did you get in my lab?". I'll always remember him saying "Get on my good side!" I am grateful for the positive and encouraging experience I had in Mike's lab, which helped me decide on a research/academic career.
Mike was a great and authentic person, and I feel very fortunate to have been mentored by him.
My condolences to you at this difficult time.
Angie Brooks-Wilson

— Angie Brooks-Wilson

May the beautiful soul of Dr. Smith Rest In Peace. He’s a big loss to the family and to his loved ones. Although losing a great man like him is very painful but the treasure of beautiful and inspiring memories he left behind will always be nourishing and consoling.
May his memory be eternal
Afifi Obeid Abboud

— Afifi Obeid Abboud

Dear Smith Family:

Our deepest condolences on the loss of your husband, father and/or relative, Mike Smith. Knowing Mike and being a graduate student in his lab was pivotal in my professional career. His love of teaching, skill at mentoring, excellence in science, curiosity about nature and, most importantly, his deep warmth and caring as human being made his presence in my life and that of my family a blessing and inspiration. It all began with the day of my Master thesis defense, of which he was on the Committee. After my defense presentation, he asked me to join his lab to work on a new project in molecular genetics of sturgeon! That moment, sent me on a new and positive direction for the rest of my life. Moreover, Mike provided an example of mentorship and embraced my family with his support and love.

He will be deeply missed but never forgotten. He leaves a deep legacy of impacting the lives of so many students, colleagues and friends. My family and I are so blessed to have known Mike as well as his wife Margaret and children, Jennifer and James.

Sincerely, James Brown, Rose Obeid, Reema and Layal Brown

— James Brown

I was saddened to learn of Mike's passing. He was a wonderful teacher and mentor to myself and many colleges of mine in the 1970s at SFU. I will always relish the many great coffee break and research conversations with Mike over a couple of semesters working in his lab. I also have great memories of playing defender alongside Mike on our departmental indoor soccer team. I am a great believer in we make our mark in life by the positive impact we leave on those that remain. Mike had that impact on me and many others at SFU. My condolences to the family on their loss.

— Alexander H.G. Fraser

I was lucky enough to work alongside Mike in Dehnels lab at UBC.
I will always remember Mike bringing in cinnamon rolls for morning tea with a big smile
This friendship existed throughout our lives and we were privileged to spend time with him when we were last in BC.
Our thoughts are with you Jennifer and the rest of the family.
With love from Elspeth and David Wilkinson.

— Elspeth and Dave

I’m so sorry to hear of Mike’s passing. He was the chair of the department at SFU when I was doing my PhD with David Baillie. He was always supportive and could always make me smile. He had a great laugh and a great sense of humour. He was definitely a memorable influence during my years in the department.

— Lynnette Kuervers

So sorry to hear of Mike's passing, he was a great guy. I first met Mike the day of my job talk at SFU. He told me that he never fell asleep in seminars and that I should be worried if he did. Halfway through my talk I look to the back of the room and see Mike sound asleep...

— Nick Harden

I only knew Mike briefly, but have fond memories of him. I was a new faculty member with an office in a mostly deserted hallway; Mike was my occasional hallmate. He was emeritus and recently returned from teaching in Qatar. He had all the time in the world to chat. We talked about teaching - my experience as a new instructor, and his experiences in Qatar. He was always so supportive. He once attended one of my lectures, and was so encouraging about the ideas I was trying out. And then he'd disappear from the hallway again - off hunting, or busy with other projects. My condolences to his family.

— Erin Barley

Dear Jennifer and family,
This is Andrea, and I was your dad’s nurse on June 8th. I just wanted to say thank you so much for your lovely card and the story of Michael’s life. It was so touching to read about all of his accomplishments, and the card means so much to me… I'm sorry I didn’t get to know Michael better because he sounds like an amazing person and very intelligent. I wish I could have had the chance to talk to him because I would have learned so much. Thank you again for your kindness, and I will keep always keep your card and story of Michael’s life to inspire me to be the best nurse that I can.

— Andrea

When I started my studies at SFU the only thing I knew was that I wanted to learn about biology. Initially, as an electrical engineer, I was drawn to biophysics. However, the phenomenal development biology lectures given by Mike convinced me otherwise. Mike not only became my Ph.D. supervisor but a great mentor and friend. He taught me discipline in the lab and in writing. Of course, he did not know that I was dyslexic when he made me rewrite my thesis several times. He just assumed that I needed a little more practice since English was my second language. Every time I write a scientific paper I think of this event and him.

— Imre (Imi) Kovesdi

Dr. Smith would share a square of dark chocolate nearly everyday after lunch during our time in Qatar where I worked as a TA down the hall from his biology office. It was the secret to good health, he said. To this day, I think of him when I eat a square of extra dark chocolate. Thanks for the smiles and the chocolate, you are missed.

— Erin K

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https://www.myalternatives.ca/obituaries/smith-michael-joseph

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