

Nobel laureate George Smoot, who researched the universe's origins at UC Berkeley, dies at 80

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Dr. George Smoot, professor of Physics at the University of California Berkeley, gestures during a media conference Tuesday, Oct. 3, 2006, in Berkeley, Calif.
Credit: AP Photo/Ben Margot, File

Nobel laureate Dr. George Smoot, who conducted groundbreaking research into the origins of the universe during a long career at the University of California, Berkeley, and the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, has died, the school said. He was 80.

Smoot died on Sept. 18 in Paris of a heart attack, according to a statement Monday by UC Berkeley.

Along with John Mather of the NASA Goddard Space Flight Center, Smoot won the 2006 Nobel Prize for physics for finding the [background radiation](#) that finally pinned down the Big Bang theory, the idea that the universe was born in a rapid cosmic expansion some 14 billion years ago.

The Florida native earned a Ph.D. in [particle physics](#) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1970. He soon joined the Berkeley Lab, "where he spent a distinguished career uncovering the secrets of the universe," lab director Mike Witherell wrote in a tribute.

At the lab, George led a research team that produced detailed maps of the infant universe.

"They revealed a pattern of minuscule temperature variations in the [cosmic microwave background](#), relic light from billions of years ago. Those early tiny fluctuations evolved into the galaxies we observe today," Witherell wrote. It was that research that led to Smoot and Mather winning the Nobel Prize.

He used \$500,000 of his Nobel money to launch the Berkeley Center for Cosmological Physics at UC Berkeley. He traveled the world after retiring from the Berkeley Lab in 2014, and took a keen interest in climate change.

Smoot also appeared as himself—twice—on the hit CBS sitcom "The

Big Bang Theory," including in an episode where he lectured at a fictional physics symposium. In 2009 he won the top prize on the Fox TV game show "Are You Smarter Than A 5th Grader?"

Smoot also taught at the Astroparticle and Cosmology Laboratory in Paris.

"We will remember him as a larger than life character, with a broad range of interests beyond the discoveries for which he is best known," the APC Lab said in an online tribute.

Smoot is survived by a sister, Sharon Smoot Bowie, of New London, New Hampshire, two nieces, and his partner, Nóra Csiszár of Paris, the university statement said.

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