ERIC L. NELSON, PH.D.

June 29, 1924 – January 24, 2016

Eric Loren Nelson, Ph.D., an educator, scientist and entrepreneur who was a pioneer in the field of drug discovery and long-time, major contributor to the University of California, Irvine, serving on the UCI Foundation Board of Trustees for nearly 25 years and receiving the UCI Medal of Honor in 1994, has died. He was 91.

Dr. Nelson passed away peacefully at his home in Newport Beach, California, surrounded by his loving family. The cause of death was congestive heart failure.

A native Californian, Dr. Nelson was born in Hollywood to Swedish immigrant parents and grew up enjoying the quintessential Southern California lifestyle. He loved to play tennis, body surf at Santa Monica beach and often worked alongside his father, a successful building contractor who worked with famed architect Richard Neutra. As a young boy, Dr. Nelson contracted a near-fatal case of bacterial meningitis and was cured only after being treated with an experimental drug serum. At the time, antibiotics were not yet available. This experience had a profound influence on his later work in the field of drug discovery.

After graduating from Hollywood High School, Dr. Nelson enrolled at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and earned a letter as a member of the Bruins tennis team. World War II intervened and, in 1943, he enlisted in the U.S. Navy and was accepted into the V-12 college training program at UCLA, followed by officer training at Columbia University in New York City. He served aboard the destroyer escort USS O'Toole, protecting convoys from enemy submarines and aircraft in the North Atlantic. Dr. Nelson was proud to serve his country and remained in the active Naval Reserve until 1972, retiring as a Commander.

Following the end of WWII, Dr. Nelson returned to his studies at UCLA. There he met the love of his life, Lila Doyn Dixon. They were married on February 6, 1948. Dr. Nelson earned his undergraduate and doctorate degrees in microbiology from UCLA. He spent the early part of his career in academia, holding faculty appointments at UCLA in the Departments of Microbiology and Infectious Diseases and at the University of Chicago Department of Medicine. He was elected a member of the Society of the Sigma Xi, UCLA Chapter, in 1951.

A chance encounter in 1959 with Gavin Herbert, Jr. of Allergan Pharmaceuticals, Inc. changed the course of his career. In 1961, Dr. Nelson joined the young company located in Santa Ana, California to establish its research organization and served as Senior Vice President of Research and Development. During his 11 years at Allergan, he collaborated with academic scientists around the world, including at UCI, and became an early advocate of nurturing cutting-edge academic research and bringing university discoveries to the commercial market. Today, academic and industry
partnerships are standard practice in the pharmaceutical and medical research fields.

In 1972, Dr. Nelson founded Nelson Research & Development Co., headquartered in Irvine, California, to design and develop novel therapeutics and drug delivery systems utilizing a pioneering expertise in drug receptor technology. The small, highly-creative organization was structured to benefit from relationships with leading members of the international academic and scientific communities who were major contributors to the dynamic field of receptor research.

Originally a spin-off of Allergan, the publicly traded Nelson Research became the first private enterprise to locate on the UCI campus with the construction of the Nelson Research Center in 1984. The unique facility was designed for use by both Nelson Research and the UCI School of Medicine. Dr. Nelson served as Chairman of the Board and President of Nelson Research until 1986. The company was acquired by Ethyl Corporation in 1987. The Nelson Research Center, now known as Irvine Hall, currently houses the UCI School of Medicine, Nelson Auditorium and Brain Imaging Center.

Dr. Nelson and his wife established the Eric L. and Lila D. Nelson Endowed Chair in Neuropharmacology at the UCI School of Medicine in 1988, among the couple’s many gifts to the university. Dr. Nelson received the UCI Alumni Association Lauds and Laurels Award for University Service in 1991, the UCI Medal – the university’s highest honor – in 1994 and, together with his wife, the Brain Imaging Award as Outstanding Volunteers in 1997. He was a member of the Chancellor’s Club and served on the UCI Foundation Board continuously since 1991 and was an active member of the foundation’s Board of Trustees at the time of his death.

Dr. Nelson remained a life-long, avid Bruins fan and held UCLA football season tickets for 74 years. He was a 40-year member of the Balboa Bay Club, a charter member of the Center Club, a loyal supporter of the Orange County Performing Arts Center (now Segerstrom Center for the Arts), including serving on the Board of Directors of Opera Pacifica from 1991 to 1996, and a supporter of numerous charitable organizations, including Hoag Hospital, Boy Scouts of America, Newport Beach Public Library and St. Mark Presbyterian Church. The Ellis Island Foundation and U.S. Navy Memorial Foundation also were close to his heart.

Dr. Nelson will be sorely missed by all who knew him. His commitment to the field of drug discovery reflected his sincere interest in the human condition and desire to improve the lives of others. He was a creative force and prolific inventor throughout his life. He was a loyal friend, an inspiring mentor, a visionary leader and a generous philanthropist. Dr. Nelson will be remembered for his universal kindness, his warm and gracious nature, his adventurous spirit and somewhat mischievous sense of humor. He will be remembered as a Renaissance man with a strong knowledge and appreciation of history, politics, literature, the arts and sports, in addition to science.
Most importantly, he will be remembered by his family as a deeply devoted and loving husband, father and grandfather of extraordinary strength and character.

Dr. Nelson is survived by his wife of nearly 68 years, Lila Nelson, his three daughters, Diana Krause, Ph.D. (Kim Krause, deceased 1999), Lori Berg, Esq. (Raymond Berg, M.D.) and Devon Bloom (Jeffrey Bloom), and five grandsons, Loren Krause (Fatimah Guienieze), Jon Berg, Peter Berg, James Bloom and Michael Bloom. He was preceded in death by his parents, Eric F. Nelson and Elsa Larsson Nelson.

A funeral service was held on Saturday, January 30, 2016 at 11:00 a.m. at St. Mark Presbyterian Church, 2200 San Joaquin Hills Road, Newport Beach, California. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made in Dr. Nelson's memory to the UCI Gavin Herbert Eye Institute, attention Janice Briggs, 850 Health Sciences Road, Irvine, CA 92697 (phone 949.824.0091).