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Van driver's work in Massachusetts aided Nobel winners

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HUNTSVILLE, Ala. --When two American scientists won a Nobel Prize this week in chemistry, the driver of a car dealership's courtesy van had reason to take special interest.

Research done by Douglas Prasher at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Falmouth, Mass., was critical in helping winners Martin Chalfie and Roger Tsien's figure out how to use a glowing green protein from jellyfish to study how cells work.

Prasher, who now works at Bill Penney Toyota in Huntsville, Ala., wasn't one of the three winners -- which also included a scientist, Osamu Shimomura, from Falmouth, Mass. -- but he said he doesn't feel left out.

"No, it doesn't bother me one bit," the 57-year-old said Friday.

As a young scientist at the University of Georgia and later at Woods Hole, Prasher isolated and copied the gene that makes the mysterious *Aequoria Victoria* jellyfish glow.

It was a glow he believed could be used to highlight molecular functions that otherwise would be invisible to scientists. But Prasher's research grant ran out, and he said he gave a copy of the gene to Chalfie of Columbia University and Tsien, a researcher at the University of California, San Diego.

On Wednesday, Chalfie, Tsien and the man who discovered green fluorescent protein in the early 1960s, Osamu Shimomura, won the Nobel Prize in chemistry for helping turn the substance into a vital biotechnology tool. They will split a \$1.4 million prize.

Researchers worldwide use the protein to track development of brain cells, the growth of tumors and the spread of cancer cells. It has let them study nerve cell damage from Alzheimer's disease and see how insulin-producing beta cells arise in the pancreas of a growing embryo, for example.

At a news conference in San Diego after winning the award, Tsien said Prasher's work made the research that led to the Nobel Prize possible.

"We were lucky to get hold of some of the material from Douglas Prasher and give it a try and amazingly it did work," Tsien said.

Prasher said his research included trips to Friday Harbor, Wash., where the cold waters are thick with jellyfish. He said he would scoop up the jellyfish in nets to be able to study their protein.

"People out there would ask me what I was doing and I said I was collecting jellyfish. They said they never thought they would see a grown man collecting jellyfish," Prasher said.

After a mild heart attack at age 51, Prasher came to Huntsville and was hired by NASA subcontractor AZ Technology to help develop hand-held sensors that could detect harmful bacteria and germs inside spaceships.

But when NASA slashed funding for the sensor project, Prasher was at loose ends.

With the bills mounting at home, he took the job driving the courtesy van for the Huntsville dealership. He said he thought driving the van would be a good way to meet people and potentially make business contacts.

"He's very overqualified for the job," Bill Penney's service director, Bob Pruitt, said Thursday. "You don't get too many biochemical engineers wanting to be your porter, but he wanted to keep himself busy doing something."