

The quest for elusive Nobel prize

When the Norwegian Nobel Committee announced President Obama as this year's winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, I gave thought to whether an Alabama citizen or institution had ever been selected for this coveted award. In its 90-year history, no Alabama person or organization has.

There are, however, winners of other Nobel Prizes in our midst.

Honorable mention goes to Dr. Douglas Prasher, a Bill Penney Toyota of Huntsville shuttle driver down on his luck. Prior to scooting people around town, Prasher was a research chemist who isolated a gene that makes jellyfish glow in the dark.

He correctly predicted the gene could be used to study deadly diseases in humans. Short of funds, he handed over his work to other scientists who continued his research, leading to the 2008 Nobel Prize in chemistry. While acknowledging that they could not have won the prize without Prasher's disease tracking discovery, the three luminary scientists split the \$1.4 million award among themselves.

Prasher got a free fish dinner at the Nobel ceremony in Stockholm. In my humble opinion, he should have at least been awarded a Volvo dealership.

Speaking of shared prizes, that is what happened to Al Gore. Al got 50 percent of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize "for efforts to build and disseminate greater knowledge about man-made climate change." The prize was split with the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

One of those IPCC winning scientists is located right here in Huntsville. Dr. John Christy is director of the Earth System Science Center at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. In an op-ed article to the *Wall Street Journal* in November two years ago titled "My



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Nobel Moment," Christy wrote of his tiny (and unofficial) slice of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize rationed among thousands of other scientists across the globe. Borrowing from his calculation, that's "0.0001 Nobel Laureate" — hardly worth the carbon footprint of flying off to Oslo.

The most peculiar laureate decorations are those presented in early October in a raucous ceremony at Harvard University. A parody of the Nobel Prizes, the Ig Nobel Prizes are given for achievements that first make people laugh, then make them think. Prizes are awarded by actual Nobel Laureates for real accomplishments in recognition of the unusual and imaginative.

A resident of Hartselle, Dan Meyer, won the prize for medicine in 2007. Dan is a professional sword swallower who plies his cutting edge trade in performances around the world. He shared the award with another blade ingurgitator who assisted in researching 110 sword swallowers from 16 countries, in a pointed study of the risks to ingesting shafts of cold, hard steel.

Conclusion: Injured performers have a better prognosis than patients who suffer iatrogenic perforation.

In 1994 the Ig Nobel Prize for Mathematics was awarded to the Southern Baptist Church of Alabama for its mathematical measures of mortality and county-by-county estimate of how many Alabama citizens will go to hell if they don't repent.

The county with the highest percentage of residents who are unsaved is Shelby at 63.5 percent. Madison County came in third with 55.2 percent unsaved souls. In the 15 years since the survey, unless our fellow Huntsvillians have mended their ways, about every other person you see around town is statistically going to hell.

As there is an obvious shortage of Alabama citizens winning any Nobel Prize, let's all try to encourage our leaders to at least aim for an Ig Nobel in 2010.

Our legislators can apply in mathematics by calculating logarithmic means of keeping up with the state's constitutional amendments.

And the award goes to . . .

Don Palmer is a Times community columnist for 2009.