

## Famous Asian American & Pacific Islander scientists

*By Julie Ulrich for Inclusion & Diversity and Multiculturals in Leadership*

In May, the United States celebrates Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage Month. The month has been commemorated in some form since 1977, when a House Joint Resolution proclaimed the first 10 days in May Pacific/Asian American Heritage Week. May was selected because the first Japanese immigrated to the United States in May 1843 and the transcontinental railroad, assembled largely by Chinese immigrant laborers, was completed in May 1869.

As part of INL's celebration of Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month, we are highlighting four famous AAPI scientists. Later this month, we'll have a story featuring several INL employees with AAPI heritage.

Do you know of other famous AAPI in science? Share a story in the comments section at the end of the article.

### [Isabella Aiona Abbott](#)

*Ethobotanist (1919 – 2010)*

Isabella Aiona Abbott was the first native Hawaiian woman to earn a Ph.D. in science (botany). She was born in Hana, Maui, Territory of Hawaii and grew up in Honolulu. During her career as an ethnobotanist, a scientist who studies the interaction of humans and plants, she published over 150 journal articles and wrote eight books. Abbott is most famously known for her expertise in Pacific algae, particularly Hawaiian seaweed ("limu" in Hawaiian). Because of this, she's been nicknamed the "First Lady of Limu." Abbott lived to be 91.

### [Narinder S. Kapany](#)

*Physicist (1926 – )*

Born in Moga, Punjab, India, Narinder S. Kapany is an Indian-American physicist known as the "Father of Fiber Optics." While earning his Ph.D. in optics at the Imperial College in London, Kapany performed research with Harold Hopkins to improve the quality of images transmitted using optical fibers. In a 1960 Scientific American article, Kapany first coined the term "fiber optics." He now holds over 100 patents and his research on fiber optics has had tremendous impact on modern communications. He's also a philanthropist with an interest in education and the arts. Kapany currently resides in the California Bay Area.

### [Kalpana Chawla](#)

*Astronaut (1962 – 2003)*

Kalpana Chawla was a NASA astronaut and the first woman of Indian heritage to go to space. She was born in Karnal, Punjab, India, and moved to the U.S. in 1982 to start her Master of Science degree in aerospace engineering. Chawla obtained a second master's and a Ph.D. in aerospace engineering from the University of Colorado, Boulder. She joined NASA in 1995. Her first space mission was in 1997 on the Space Shuttle Columbia as a mission specialist and primary robotic arm operator. Her second space mission was also aboard Columbia in 2003. During the mission, the shuttle broke apart during re-entry and Chawla died along with six other crew members. She has received many posthumous honors including the Kalpana Chawla Award to recognize young women scientists, an Asteroid (51826 Kalpana chawla), a street in Queens, New York (Kalpana Chawla Way) and a NASA supercomputer (Chawla).

### [Steven Chu](#)

*Physicist (1948 – )*

Steven Chu is an American physicist and was the 12th U.S. secretary of energy. He was born in St. Louis, Missouri, and traces his ancestry to Jiangsu, China. Chu earned his doctorate in physics from University of California, Berkeley, where he also worked as a postdoctoral researcher for two years. In his research career, he has worked at Bell Laboratories, Stanford University and Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. He was a co-winner of a Nobel Prize in Physics in 1997 for research on how to cool and trap atoms with laser light. He served as U.S. energy secretary from January 2009 to April 2013, and was a strong proponent of nuclear power and renewable energy. He is currently a professor in the Physics and the Molecular and Cellular Physiology departments at Stanford University.

### **Resources:**

[AAPI Heritage Month Timeline](#)

[AAPI Heritage Month Facts and Figures](#)

[Things NOT to Say to Asian-Americans in the Workplace](#)