

LOCAL

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Tom Paulson

Trisha Andrew, left, and Stephanie Benight both worked with University of Washington photonics expert Larry Dalton. They're among 600 researchers from 67 countries spending a week with Nobel Laureates at a meeting in Germany.

Two UW students among science elite at German conference

By TOM PAULSON
SPECIAL TO SEATTLEPI.COM

LINDAU, Germany -- Among nearly 600 young researchers selected from 67 countries to spend an intimate week here with 23 Nobel Prize-winning scientists are two products of one chemist at the University of Washington.

Neither concluded their participation Friday in this high-powered, if still somewhat obscure, gathering as famous as the Nobel Laureates themselves. But Stephanie Benight, a UW graduate student who now works in the lab of photonics (light-mediated electronics) expert Larry Dalton, and Trisha Andrew, a Seattle native who worked with Dalton as a UW undergraduate before heading to MIT for doctoral studies, nevertheless appear to be good bets for future high honors.

"It's just amazing to be included in a gathering like this," said Benight, 24, who studies molecular structures called "chromophores" that can be exploited to use optical light instead of electrons to speed up signal transmission in computers, broadband communications and other devices.

"I mean it's not every day you get to hang out and ask someone like Sir Harold Kroto (1996 Nobel Prize in Chemistry) about anything you like," Benight said. She and her colleagues certainly did that, barraging Kroto with -- among other things -- a litany of questions responding to his comments disdainful of religious belief.

The young scientist perhaps most immediately recognized by his peers at this exclusive event, the 59th Lindau Nobel Laureate Meeting, located amid medieval buildings on an island in a lake located at the juncture of Austria, Switzerland and Bavaria, achieved his moment of fame among this select group for a tendency to lose his shoes. But that must be explained later. The Lindau Nobel Laureate Meeting, which is separate from that Swedish organization that hands out the prizes, was created in 1951 by a local dignitary (and son of the Swedish King Gustav V), Count Lennart Bernadotte. The idea of the Lindau meetings, which are unlike anything else in science, is to have those at the very pinnacle of scientific achievement spend quality time with those at the very beginning of their careers.

The Nobel Laureates talked about science, of course, but some chose to talk about their love of art, personal experiences, beliefs or policy. Chemistry was this year's theme, but anyone could talk about anything.

"You get to come here and just be yourself," said Andrew, 25, who graduated from Shorecrest High School (and credits a teacher there with infusing her with a love for science). At MIT, she is working on solar energy technology and has also helped build a new kind of bomb-detecting device -- using the chemistry of fluorescence -- that the

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military now uses in Iraq.

"Seattle is a great place to grow up if you like science, but too much of the education there still seems geared toward things like bio-engineering, medical science or business applications," Andrew said. "I needed more variety, more of a focus on basic science."

That was definitely a common complaint at the meeting, as a number of Nobel Laureates bemoaned the tendency of scientific institutions and government funding agencies today to heavily favor "applied" science -- projects with a definite goal -- as against the kind of open-ended inquiry aimed at simply investigating an interesting question. Basic science.

Dr. Peter Agre, who won the 2003 Nobel in chemistry for answering the basic question of how water is transported into and out of cells, said he was concerned that American science is in a period of decline.

"There just doesn't seem to be the kind of public interest in science that there used to be," said Agre, who directs malaria research at Johns Hopkins University and is also president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

"Our graduate programs in science are filled with international students," he said. "Most of our best and brightest choose something other than science and we're losing ground. Something's out of whack."

Agre, who was a science advisor to the Obama presidential campaign, said the Bush Administration was decidedly bad for science on a number of fronts. But the problem appears to be cultural, he said, existing before Bush and persisting after if nothing is done to encourage more young people to make science a career.

"The problem is we have a strong sub-cultural thread that is simply anti-intellectual, anti-science," said PZ Myers, a University of Minnesota biology professor and attending blogger who frequently takes on creationist groups, Seattle's Discovery Institute and others who argue against Darwinian evolution.

"Here in Germany, that kind of debate is considered trivial," Myers said. "In the U.S., anti-intellectualism is not a trivial problem. We have a culture war that isn't happening in Europe."

For Benight and Andrew, science is simply an exciting adventure, a chance to use their talents to explore territory nobody has yet conquered or mapped. Both said the Lindau conference gave them a much greater sense of identity as part of a community as well as a chance to meet colleagues from around the world.

"There's really nothing else like this anywhere in the world," said Benight.

Oh, and for that other fellow who lost his shoes? Let's just call him "Ed" and say he works at a university somewhere west of the Mississippi. It's clear that Ed fully enjoyed taking a break from the pressures of academia in a region known for its beer.

"When I drink too much, I take my shoes off and end up throwing them away," he said. Why? He's not sure. It just seems like the thing to do at that moment, he explained.

Ed said he packed two extra pairs for this meeting. One suspects he, too, will do great things.

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