

PRESS INFORMATION

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Outstanding Alumni Award for Robert Turner

Canadian University presents Max Planck Director Professor Robert Turner with outstanding achievement award



Max Planck Institute for Human
Cognitive and Brain Sciences

Stephanstrasse 1A
04103 Leipzig, Germany

Postfach 500355
04303 Leipzig, Germany

Website: www.cbs.mpg.de

Professor Robert Turner and Bernie Maroney, President of the Simon Fraser University Alumni Association (Photograph: Greg Ehlers, Simon Fraser University)

Max Planck Director Professor Robert Turner has been named winner of a Simon Fraser University Outstanding Alumni Award for 2009. Turner, who graduated with a PhD in 1973, joins a select list of former students to be honoured as one of the university's most accomplished graduates. The Professional Achievement Award is in recognition of his significant achievements in physics and advancements in magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) technology.

In their announcement of the 2009 winners, the Alumni Association acknowledged the major contribution Professor Turner has made internationally in the field of MRI. This began with ground-breaking work in the 1980s, and continues today at the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences in Leipzig. The Alumni Association describe recipients of their Alumni Awards as those who "go above and beyond, inspiring all of us to reach for our own personal best" and this is certainly true of Professor Turner, whose work has been influential in number of areas.

Dr. Alex Mackay, Director of the University of British Columbia MRI Research Centre, says "Because he has such a broad knowledge, Professor Turner is able to bring in things nobody else thought of", adding that Professor Turner's work has "crossed fields in a major way." This is because

he has produced important academic papers in a large number of different fields, in particular, physics and brain science.

With such a distinguished career – his work has resulted in a number of patents, and coils that owe their shape to his ideas are inside every MRI scanner – it seems that such an award has been long overdue. The main impetus for Turner’s nomination for the 2009 award was his appointment as Director at the Max Planck Institute in Leipzig – one of only 246 MPI directors worldwide. His former PhD supervisor was excited to hear he had achieved this leading position and decided to nominate him for the award.

The 2009 awards were presented at a ceremony in Vancouver on January 27th, 2010. The award ceremony, held at a banquet dinner, was attended by approximately 200 people including the President/Vice-Chancellor of SFU and leading representatives from local and state government, and local business. The other recipients of awards for 2009 included an Olympic gold medallist and well-known Canadian author – people who are “very public figures in Canada” says Turner.

Professor Turner describes the award as a great honour. “It’s a recognition in both directions – of what they did for me and what I’ve done for them”, he says. At the time, however, choosing SFU was a “serious gamble”. He had acceptances for post-graduate positions from five other leading universities including Cornell and the University of Bristol, which both had world-famous physics departments, Cornell offering the opportunity to work with Nobel prize-winning physicists. SFU, in contrast, had no reputation at all but was very well-equipped and attracted a very good year of PhD students who were bright, inventive, creative physicists. In this “quite competitive” atmosphere, Turner says he received a “truly first-rate Physics postgraduate education.”

Today, as director of the Department of Neurophysics at the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences in Leipzig, Professor Turner’s significant achievements are evidence that choosing SFU was a good decision. He has collaborated with Nobel Prize winners, led the way in the design of scanner technology and today is at the pinnacle of imaging neuroscience as head of a team of over 20 researchers and junior researchers looking to further advance the field of MRI. His message is, “Stay true to your dreams. Oxbridge or Harvard are not the only place to start a research career”.

[Rosie Wallis]

Contact:

Dr Christina Schröder
Research Co-ordinator
Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences, Leipzig
Tel.: +49 (0)341 9940-132
Email: cschroeder@cbs.mpg.de

Julie Saito
Director, Simon Fraser University Alumni Relations
Simon Fraser University
Tel.: +1 778 782 3688
Email: jsaito@sfu.ca