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Nobelist Walter Kohn: A Nice Guy Who Finished First

Freshly minted Nobel laureate Walter Kohn, an internationally renowned research professor in condensed matter physics at the University of California, Santa Barbara, has been lauded far and wide for his contributions to quantum chemistry and to his home campus.

"It couldn't have happened to a nicer guy," physicist Mark Sherwin, a colleague of Kohn's, told a Santa Barbara television reporter the day the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences announced that the Nobel Prize in chemistry was to be shared by Kohn and computational chemist John Pople of Northwestern University.

That description keynoted a week of congratulatory messages and receptions for Kohn on and off campus. It is the humanity of the scientist that has colleagues and acquaintances standing up and cheering for Kohn, who retired from teaching, but not from research, at UCSB in 1991.

Earlier this month, the 75-year-old music lover was co-chair of two events designed to bring together separate musical cultures and ethnic traditions. As part of "Building Bridges 1998," a Santa Barbara-based series of talks, films, and performances sponsored by 39 civic organizations, Kohn and a co-chair brought together a Jewish klezmer band and a mariachi group. At another event, they united a jazz and blues pianist with the UCSB Middle East Ensemble.

Over the years, Kohn's other activities have ranged from support for the local music scene, to opposing UC's peacetime nuclear weapons research, to being a long-time board member of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, to working for international peace, often through people-to-people efforts. In 1992, for example, he helped raise \$10,000 to send medical supplies from Santa Barbara to two needy clinics in St. Petersburg, Russia.

A native of Vienna, the Nazis forced Kohn and a sister to flee Austria when they were teen-agers. She went to England in 1938 and he followed the next year on the last of the special children's trains. Later, he would say that he escaped the Holocaust "by the skin of my teeth." Their parents were not so fortunate, and were killed in a Nazi death camp.

Today, Kohn has no fewer than nine honorary degrees, including one from Austria. Among his many special recognitions are the 1988 National Medal of Science from the United States and the 1998 Niels Bohr gold medal from the United Nations.

At the University of California, where Kohn first spent 19 years at San Diego before moving to the Santa Barbara campus, he helped UCSD build the Physics Department and its Judaic Studies Program. He also served for 10 years on the advisory board for the statewide Institute of Global Conflict and Cooperation, and he was a member of the Academic Senate's Review Committee of UC-Managed National Laboratories.

"It's delightful to see a wonderful person recognized," said Robert Sugar, one of the physicists who recruited Kohn to UCSB in 1979 to be the founding director of the campus's Institute for Theoretical Physics (ITP). The National Science Foundation-funded think tank promotes cross-disciplinary research into understanding problems in the physical sciences. While the ITP has been the model for similar institutes at Harvard, UC Berkeley, Cambridge University, and elsewhere, it was controversial at the beginning. Kohn's stature and personality helped to change that.

At UCSB, Kohn also helped found the Global Peace and Security Program, which is now affiliated with the Global and International Studies Program.

UCSB chemist and long-time friend Horia Metiu is surprised by neither the applause nor the Nobel: "He should have gotten it five years ago. He is a highly civilized person who seems to have very little ego, which is rare in a person of his caliber, and he is really interested in people."

Metiu observed that Kohn enjoys throwing parties and barbecuing. "He makes a terrific guacamole. I once told his wife that that was what Walter would be remembered for, not his [prize-winning] theory," joshed Metiu.

Kohn recalls the special pleasure he felt in 1994 when, three years after his retirement, the ITP's new home was named in his honor. Appropriately, Kohn Hall was the site of the UCSB news conference that introduced the new Nobelist to the world.

About UC Santa Barbara

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