

UC SANTA BARBARA

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UCSB Researcher Theodore Kim Thanks Academy Awards 'For This Great Honor'

Palm trees and serene settings aside, UC Santa Barbara and the Beverly Hills Hotel are two very different places. The tech-heavy research labs and humming lecture halls of the former are a far cry from the pristine white appointments and luxury of the latter -- not to mention the ever-present red carpet leading into its lobby.

But the two paired well Saturday night, when Theodore Kim, an assistant professor of computer science at UCSB's Media Arts and Technology program, walked that very carpet and picked up his Academy Award in Technical Achievement during a lavish ceremony at the iconic Hollywood hotel.

Honored, with three collaborators, for the development of an advanced, now industry standard technique for smoke and fire effects, Kim is the first sitting UCSB faculty to win an Academy Award. His acceptance speech marked another milestone for the campus: getting a shout-out from the Oscar stage.

"The University of California, Santa Barbara, where I work, is tremendously supportive," computer scientist Kim told a capacity crowd during the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' Scientific and Technical Awards. "I'd like to thank my deans, David Marshall and Rod Alferness, and the head of our department, Curtis Roads, at Media Arts and Technology."

In fact, Kim made a plug for academia at large, noting that university labs are not considered the most common birthplace for Oscar-winning innovations. He thanked the entertainment world for noticing, and for making his wavelet turbulence method, as it's known, a go-to resource for fire effects.

"I'd like to thank the Academy for this great honor," he said, standing center-stage before a quartet of life-sized Oscar statuettes in the hotel's Crystal Ballroom. "If it wasn't for a lot of people in the industry picking up on this technology, this award wouldn't be possible."

Afterward, Kim expressed a hope that academia -- and UC Santa Barbara -- would find itself in such situations more frequently, saying, "The next goal is to build up the program here at UCSB so that eventually one of my students gets an Oscar."

Kim shared the accolade with Nils Thuerey, of effects studio ScanLineVFX; Doug James, of Cornell University; and Markus Gross, of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH Zurich). The four created wavelet turbulence while Kim was a graduate student at Cornell. James used his speech Saturday night to mostly laud Kim.

"When I think of wavelet turbulence, it's going to evoke fond memories of working with Ted during his time at Cornell," James told the audience. "As professors, Markus and I have advised and mentored many talented young researchers. Sometimes our young collaborators are just so damn good, and their projects are so successful, that it exceeds our wildest dreams. For that reason, I think Ted and Nils can be particularly proud of this Oscar achievement."

Kim and Theurey sat side-by-side throughout Saturday's festivities, flanked by their families, who had flown from across the country and around the world to attend the black-tie event. A sea of tuxedoed and gowned guests filled the ballroom for the dinner ceremony hosted by actors Chris Pine and Zoe Saldana, co-stars of the upcoming film "Star Trek Into Darkness," a sneak peek of which was shown before the awards were dispensed.

Seeing the exclusive J.J. Abrams footage, meeting celebrities Pine and Saldana, and, of course, receiving an Academy Award himself, were among contributing factors to what Kim described as the "completely surreal" feeling that stayed with him all night. The paparazzi experience played a key role as well.

"I was very surprised to be standing in front of a wall of cameras, pointed straight at me, as dozens of flashbulbs went off," Kim relayed later of facing a "phalanx of photographers" for an awardee photo shoot.

And lest he join the infamous pantheon of Oscar winners who neglected to thank their significant others, Kim's speech gave major props to his, whom he met as an undergraduate at Cornell. "Of course to my beautiful wife Ivy -- who knew back in freshman year that we'd end up right here?" he asked rhetorically, gesturing around a decidedly glamorous room and offering a sweet thumbs up toward his table.

"It is a total trip being here," Ivy herself said later. "It's very exciting. I'm just glad other people appreciate him as much as I do."

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† Top image: UCSB's Theodore Kim gives his acceptance speech at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' Scientific and Technical Achievement Awards.

Credit: Greg Harbaugh / ©A.M.P.A.S.

†† Bottom image: Theodore Kim, right, of UCSB, and Doug James of Cornell, at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' Scientific and Technical Achievement Awards.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.