

ALUMNI TODAY

The name Ben Feringa is synonymous with 'inspirer of the young'. He has led 112 PhD students to the finish line, and we're still counting. Doctor number 17 gave his inaugural lecture last month and doctor 112 works for Shell.

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GERARD ROELFES (44)

STUDIED chemistry from 1990 to 1995, obtained PhD in 2000

EMPLOYED as Professor of Biomolecular Chemistry and Catalysis at the UG, gave his inaugural lecture on 15 November 2016 **LIVES** with wife Alinde (42), a practice nurse; Matthijs (13), Wouter (11) and Koen (7) **HOUSE** semi-detached in Haren **INCOME** about € 74,700 gross per annum



'Chemistry was one of my three favourite subjects at school. The other two were English and history. With those two, there was a high chance that I would become a secondary school teacher, which didn't appeal to me. Now I'm a professor and I really enjoy teaching. I started with chemical engineering, but soon discovered that I wasn't

really interested in designing chemical installations for factories. Molecules appealed to me a lot more. My interest became a passion – the magic of discovery, finding something that nobody before you has discovered. As a professor you have your own group. In my group of about fifteen people we've done lots of really exciting things. Our unifying theme is catalysis, accelerating reactions, for example by using newly designed enzymes. One of our three lines of research is developing compounds in order to study processes in cancer cells so that we can perhaps intervene.

We work together with doctors. Without passion you can't become a professor, or even get a PhD. You really can't. You have to be highly motivated. After all, it entails a good deal of sacrifice. It's definitely not a 9-to-5 job, you have to be prepared to do much more than in an ordinary job. And you have to be able to cope with failure, to have the wherewithal to keep starting afresh.

At the University we employ the tenure track system, the American model. When I started here as an assistant professor in 2006, I was given a five-year contract. I had to prove myself in those five years. I was then assessed and it was 'up or out'. I was promoted to associate professor. If that hadn't worked, it wasn't a question of 'try again next year', but rather 'look for another job'. There was a list of criteria that I had to satisfy. I believe I've managed them all very satisfactorily. It seems I'm a good teacher, and we are conducting research that leads to publications that are read. And clearly, I'm also good enough at securing funding.'

ANNE SCHOONEN (30)

STUDIED chemistry from 2004 to 2010, obtained PhD on 25 November 2016.

EMPLOYED since February 2016 as production chemist at Shell, Rijswijk **LIVES** with partner Gerbrand Hop (29) who works for the Dutch Bridge Federation (NBB) **HOUSE** top storey of mansion in The Hague embassy quarter **INCOME** € 52,500 gross per annum (plus a range of 'fantastic' benefits)



'When I heard about Ben's Nobel Prize, my first thought was: I'm so glad I already have a date for my PhD defence! His diary was always absolutely chocker, and this certainly wasn't going to get any better. My dissertation was on the chemical beginnings of life, with a philosophical aspect. Why nature makes only one mirror

image of a molecule, whereas we always find both variants in our labs. Amino acids in nature are all L-amino acids, counter-clockwise; starches are all clockwise, Type D starches. That's actually very odd. After all, you don't suddenly find only left-hand gloves, do you? The suspicion is that the presence of just one mirrored form was a prerequisite for life to evolve. But you don't find the only true answer to the mirror image question, for that you have to be able to go back as it were to the beginnings of life.

I'm not working on that topic at all at Shell. As a production chemist I have to decide which chemicals work best for getting oil and gas out of the ground. In Groningen they said: fancy the biggest tree-hugger in our group going to work for Shell! I'm not a tree-hugger. People probably take me for one because I voted for Green Left last time and I was a scout leader. I wanted to continue with technology and that's something I can do here. I was also a bit tired of the uncertainty of working at a university. At Shell they gave me a permanent contract straightaway. I also feel there's a lot happening at Shell when it comes to new, green forms of energy. Being able to grow was also something I wanted. The graduate programme that I'm part of offers me that opportunity. It's a kind of organized pathway ahead for young people.

In ten years' time I would like to be an asset manager, managing an oilfield or an oil rig. It doesn't matter where, whether it's Gabon or Qatar. I'm currently trying to organize a six-month meaningful field assignment – that's what they call it – in Gabon.'