



A Caring Hand for Tomorrow's Leaders

How Len Blavatnik is leveraging his success to help young scientists change the world.

By: Daniel Krieger | posted October 3, 2014

When Len Blavatnik attended the Nobel Prize Ceremony in Stockholm, Sweden, in 2004, he was awed by both the level of achievement being celebrated as well as the sheer gloriousness of the occasion. But he was also surprised and somewhat disheartened to see that many of the Laureates were being recognized relatively late in their illustrious careers. Given that the Nobel Prize is a retrospective acknowledgment of exceptional work, he suspected that the prize money the winners received wouldn't contribute as much as it could to the Laureates' future accomplishments. He began to wonder what kind of impact such a prize could have if the timing were shifted by a decade or two.

"We should be supporting young scientists when they need support the most," he said to Ellis Rubinstein, president and CEO of the New York Academy of Sciences, with whom he attended the ceremony. This observation inspired Blavatnik to conceive a prize that would grant the most innovative early career scientists not only much-deserved recognition, but more importantly, crucial financial support to advance them to the next stage of their research. Blavatnik envisioned it as a "Nobel Prize for young scientists," one that would benefit not only the individuals but, ultimately, everyone.

"Developing a strong and steady pipeline of highly trained scientific talent is essential if we are to successfully address the many challenges that face our society and world," he says.

The 'Nobel' for Young Scientists is Born

Three years later, in November 2007, the inaugural awards ceremony for the Blavatnik Awards for Young Scientists was held in New York. The Award is a joint venture between the New York Academy of Sciences and the Blavatnik Family Foundation, a philanthropic organization that generously supports educational, scientific, cultural, and charitable institutions throughout the world.

"Young scientists represent the future of scientific thought."

Since 2007, the awards have been given every year to a handful of postdoctoral and faculty-rank scientists in the New York City tri-state area who are 42 years old or younger and who are conducting highly innovative, interdisciplinary research in the life and physical sciences, mathematics, and engineering. Through 2013, 90 winners and finalists have been selected by a judging panel of 200 senior scientists. Funding has grown since the program's inception, and since 2013, each regional winner—chosen from a pool of hundreds of qualified applicants—receives \$30,000, while finalists receive \$10,000. To date, \$1.45 million in unrestricted funds has been awarded. Mercedes Gorre, PhD, executive director of the Blavatnik Awards, says, "These awards have successfully identified and celebrated the best young scientists in the region at a time in their careers when such recognition and support can make the most difference."

A stunning success, the regional awards helped to fulfill Blavatnik's goal to boost today's rising scientific stars, some of whom may well be on the path toward becoming tomorrow's Nobel Prize winners. "I'm pleased that we are able to provide critical support and encouragement to our most promising young scientists as they pursue their careers," Blavatnik says.

The Blavatnik Awards Go National

Though pleased with the new ecosystem for nurturing young talent he dreamt up a decade earlier, Blavatnik's vision was still growing exponentially. In 2013, he decided to expand the program to the national level, and in summer 2014 the first winners of the Blavatnik National Awards for Young Scientists were announced. The three national laureates, in the fields of life sciences, physical sciences, engineering, and chemistry, were selected from more than 300 highly innovative faculty-level researchers. They each received \$250,000—the largest unrestricted prize for young scientists.

It is essential for the award money to be unrestricted, Blavatnik feels, because there are often too many constraints placed on grant funds, putting an undue burden on the recipients, and thus, on scientific progress. Furthermore, he would rather the young scientists be free to focus on discovery rather than getting bogged down by continuously applying for grants.

"Without good science, there is no development of society," Blavatnik says. "And to maintain America's superiority in science and discovery, we need to encourage the best and the brightest to go into science, to stay in science, and to achieve the highest level of contribution to science."

A Grounding in Science

Blavatnik was raised in a Jewish family in the Soviet Union, the Russian-speaking child of two scientists. He was a superb student and always had a keen interest in math and physics, which he believes paid off in his business ventures. "Studying science is good training for life in general," he says. "It provides a rigorous, systematic approach to any problem or issue." For him, it is no coincidence that many of the most successful business people he has encountered in his travels are also trained scientists.

After immigrating to the United States with his family in 1978, Blavatnik received a Master's degree in computer science from Columbia University and earned his MBA from Harvard Business School. An American citizen since 1984, Blavatnik has been remarkably successful and active as both an entrepreneur and philanthropist. A multibillionaire, he is the founder and chairman of Access Industries, a New York-based, privately-held industrial group whose investments span the globe and include natural resources and chemicals, media and

telecommunications, and real estate.

Ever appreciative of the crucial role science plays in human endeavors ranging from computer technology and biomedical advances to quantum physics, he feels strongly that high-achieving practitioners be nurtured with a caring hand. "Throughout the centuries, science and technology have served as a catalyst for progress," Blavatnik says. "The pace of progress accelerates with new scientific discoveries, so by encouraging science, I hope to make an impact on society and the lives of everyone in the 21st century."

Blavatnik has already witnessed how his support of young scientists yields promising dividends through groundbreaking research and scientific discoveries. "It's extremely gratifying to me," he says. Some winners and finalists, buoyed by the Award's career-advancing recognition and support, have gone on to lead university departments, become MacArthur and Guggenheim Fellows, and join the National Academy of Sciences.

In addition to his philanthropic work, Blavatnik sits on boards at Cambridge University, Harvard University, and Tel Aviv University. He also founded the Blavatnik School of Government at Oxford University to train outstanding graduates from around the world in the skills and responsibilities of government. Not surprisingly, the school provides a highly practical series of courses balancing science, technology, and health with the humanities, social sciences, and finance.

The Future

Blavatnik expects that both past and future recipients of the regional and national awards will have a major impact on the quality of life of future generations, including that of his children and grandchildren.

"I hope that at least some of them become Nobel Prize winners in the near future," he says. "We already have some very strong candidates."

And someday, when the national awards are well established, he would like to take a final step to complete his vision, creating a third Blavatnik award for which young scientists throughout the world are eligible.

"Young scientists represent the future of scientific thought," he says. "By honoring these individuals and their achievements, we are helping to promote the breakthroughs in science and technology that will define how our world will look in 20, 50, 100 years."

Daniel Krieger is a journalist in New York.

© 2009 The New York Academy of Sciences. All rights reserved.