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Nobel Laureate Glenn T. Seaborg honored with endowed chair; chemistry Professor Alexander Pines named chairholder

By Jane Scheiber

- BERKELEY -- Nobel Laureate Glenn T. Seaborg, who last year became the first living scientist to have an element named for him, has been honored again, this time with the establishment of the Glenn T. Seaborg Chair in Physical Chemistry at the University of California, Berkeley. The Chair was created through a generous endowment in tribute to Seaborg and the College of Chemistry.

Endowed chairs, which provide a source of income to advance the scholarly activities of the appointed professor, also are one of the highest forms of campus recognition that a faculty member can receive. Alexander Pines, who has significantly advanced the field of nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) spectroscopy, has been named to hold the Seaborg Chair.

"It is a privilege indeed to be thus associated with my legendary colleague and good friend Glenn Seaborg," Pines says.

"It is especially fitting that Glenn Seaborg, who has received the highest awards of the international and national scientific communities, be thus recognized at the institution where he earned his doctorate and where he has spent most of his career," said College of Chemistry Dean Alexis T. Bell. "We are enormously grateful to our anonymous benefactors."

Bell added, "We anticipate that we will be able to recognize other distinguished faculty members as additional chairs are established in the future."

Seaborg earned his Ph.D. in chemistry at UC Berkeley in 1937 and joined the faculty in 1939. In the next two decades, he and his coworkers prepared and chemically characterized 10 new elements, including plutonium, americium, berkelium, and californium.

His work on the transuranium elements was recognized by the 1951 Nobel Prize (shared with the late UC Berkeley chemist Edwin McMillan) and the 1991 National Medal of Science.

Seaborg served as UC Berkeley chancellor from 1958 to 1961 before taking a 10-year leave of absence to chair the Atomic Energy Commission. He is now University Professor Emeritus, Chairman of the Lawrence Hall of Science, and Associate Director-at-Large for the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory.

Having celebrated his 86th birthday April 19, he remains active in pursuit of yet more elements.

"I am very pleased that Alex Pines, eminent scientist and my long-time friend and colleague, will be the first holder of the Seaborg Chair," said Seaborg. "I am delighted that this chair in my name has been created by an anonymous donor to honor individuals who have distinguished themselves in teaching and research."

Pines is no stranger to awards himself. In 1991 he was recognized with the international Wolf Prize, and earlier this year he received the American Chemical Society's Irving Langmuir Award for outstanding interdisciplinary research in chemical physics.

Raised in Rhodesia, Pines earned his doctorate at MIT and has been a member of the UC Berkeley faculty since 1972. He and his coworkers, fondly dubbed "Pinenuts," have pioneered techniques for applying NMR to the study of solids.

Nuclear magnetic resonance occurs in the nuclei of atoms: the magnetic moments in the nuclei oscillate at characteristic frequencies when they are placed in a magnetic field. By measuring the rates at which the nuclei absorb and emit energy, NMR studies help scientists understand the molecular structure, and hence the properties, of materials. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is an extension of NMR that is used primarily as a diagnostic medical tool.

In addition to his achievements in research, Pines has also received numerous awards as a distinguished teacher.

"Where are Pines' contributions the most significant? It depends on whom you talk to," said chemistry Chair Paul Bartlett. "Berkeley undergraduates rave about his Chem 1 lectures, perhaps even recalling the classical music that greeted them as they filtered into Pimentel Lecture Hall on a particular day. The international scientific community points to his creative discoveries in magnetic resonance spectroscopy, and his colleagues across a wide variety of disciplines would recall the important roles he plays in advising the administration and Academic Senate."

Bartlett continued, "Pines' prominence as teacher, scientist, and contributor to the university is a fitting tribute to Glenn Seaborg, who exemplified those qualities throughout his own illustrious career."

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