

# Genius sisterhood arrives in SA

### 200 top female physicists and astronauts set to arrive in the Cape, inspiring girls to enter the lab

ROWAN PHILP

THE world's cleverest women are descending on South Africa to tell local girls how female Einsteins have shaped the world.

The fourth International Conference on Women in Physics takes place in Stellenbosch this week. Luminaries attending include the woman who discovered neutron stars, a former head of the Nobel committee for physics and the world's first black female astronaut.

Pretoria physics professor Diane Grayson said the event, which will include public outreach events, would look at why South Africa has relatively few female scientists, and how to remedy this.

Women in South Africa still represent less than a quarter of graduates in physics — and no woman heads a university department in the subject.

Leading South Africa's female geniuses will be Rhodes University's Professor Tello Nyokong. She said the 200 scientists from 50 countries "could be the most brilliant group of women" the country has seen. They include:

- Swedish scientist Cecilia Järnkvist, who discovered a key relationship between the smallest particles in nature. She is scheduled to explain how she helped decide Nobel prizes for over a decade;

- Astronaut Dr Mae Jemison who orbited the earth aboard the space shuttle Endeavour in 1992. She hopes to convince young girls that science and dancing are similar; and

- British science icon Jocelyn Bell-Burnell, who discovered the strangest stars in the uni-

verse, called pulsars, and who has long been in the running to win a Nobel prize.

Others are scheduled to dazzle pupils at Stellenbosch's Renish High School as well as host demonstrations and public lectures in the town, with popular titles such as "Will the world end in 2012?" and "Little Green Men?"

Nyokong is developing a way to use targeted light, instead of damaging chemotherapy, to stop cancer.

Nyokong said: "Women don't promote each other, and we absolutely don't promote ourselves the way male scientists do."

**'We women absolutely don't promote ourselves the way male scientists do'**

The trend for girls was improving, particularly in the biological sciences which "have been completely transformed", she said. "But there are still limitations in physical sciences which, I'm afraid to say, starts in the home where boys are asked to help their fathers fix the car while the girl is expected in the kitchen.

"We have to change this ... the only technology young people are not afraid of is cell-phones."

Nyokong said her team's "photo-dynamic" therapy was "working" in pre-clinical trials but she now had to find a way to stop the sun's rays from causing nasty side effects by acting on new cancer drugs.

Organisers at the conference will attempt to raise the profile of female scientists.

When most people are asked to identify female luminaries in the field they name Marie Curie, who pioneered work on radioactivity.

This is despite the fact that Austria's Lise Meitner jointly discovered nuclear fission, which led to the creation of the atom bomb.

And many forget that Britain's Rosalind Franklin made the key discovery that revealed the structure of DNA.

Many scientists believe that, as with many other female scientists, Franklin and Meitner were unfairly overlooked for Nobel prizes and fame because of their gender.

In the field of astronomy alone a number of women — some of whom weren't even allowed to touch telescopes because of their gender — made the biggest breakthroughs.

These include a woman employed by a Harvard professor as a domestic worker.

In 1879, Boston maid Williamina Fleming became the first person to fully catalogue the stars and discovered the famous Horsehead Nebula.

Her friend, deaf spinster Annie Jump Cannon, found that all stars could be graded by a simple string of letters.

A woman was behind Edwin Hubble becoming a famous astronomer for finding other galaxies.

Henrietta Leavitt, who did menial work at Harvard's observatory, was the first person to find a way to measure the distance to distant stars.

This showed that some stars were so far away that there must be galaxies other than our own.



MEASURE FOR MEASURE: BSc honours student Mingyu Liu with Professor Tello Nyokong in a laboratory at Rhodes University

Picture: STEPHEN PENNEY

ANTON FERREIRA

IN a legal saga that has more twists than a slalom course, the planned auction of South Africa's only ski resort has temporarily been put on ice.

High Street Auction Company announced this week that Tiffindell, near Rhodes in the Eastern Cape, would be sold to the highest bidder on May 12 — only to backtrack on Friday.

"We've been a little premature," said spokesman Spiro Barbaressos.

"We've got to get a final instruction, because the dates might change."

Barbaressos declined to discuss the legal issues that erupted nearly three years ago and have now cast doubt over the auction date.

But attorney David Oshry, who represents the Van Eck family, who started the resort in 1993, said it was "absurd" that the property was up for auction.

The Van Eck family sold the property for R22-million in 2007 to Tiffiski Property Investments, which promised to invest in its development and lease it back to the family.

But the deal went sour following financial disputes between the Van Ecks and Tiffiski directors, leading to the appointment of liquidators. The liquidators brought a court action to reverse the sale.

The High Court in Johannesburg ruled against the liquidators, who have appealed against that decision in the Supreme Court in Bloemfontein.



EUROPE IN AFRICA: The Tiffindell ski resort in the Eastern Cape, which may, or may not, be up for sale

## Legal row over sale of ski resort

The case is still pending.

"We're all wondering how there can be a sale by auction, because if the liquidators are successful in their appeal, then the property is going to vest in the liquidators," said Oshry.

But Tiffiski director Andre le Roux said the auction would definitely go ahead, "whether in May or June or July".

"It's going to depend on the court dates," he said, adding that Tiffiski had a secret "trump card" that it would play shortly. This might mean that the case did not get as far as the Supreme Court.

Barbaressos said there had been "tremendous" interest in the ski resort by potential buyers. "A lot of the leisure operators are looking for a winter component

to complement their summer offerings — this is obviously ideal," he said.

"We've had all sorts of people calling. I've had a couple of calls from international ski operators looking for a footprint in Africa."

The resort last opened for business in 2009. Barbaressos said it did not open last year owing to a lack of bookings.

## Needy kids are music to his ears

BONGANI MDAKANE

TWO live performances this week by South African flautist Wouter Kellerman will do more than mesmerise the audience.

The shows by the renowned musician will be recorded, and the proceeds of the DVD will go towards funding children at the SOS Children's Village in Emmerdale, Johannesburg.

Kellerman, the father of two adult children, has been contributing R90 000 a year towards 10 children at the home since 1996.

"I love kids, and the little contribution that I make can change the world," he said, adding that he hoped the investment he was making would result in the children doing the same for others in the future.

Kellerman was one of a string of talented artists who performed during last year's soccer World Cup closing ceremony, which was viewed by a global television audience of more than 700 million people.

Rae Bagus, a senior fundraiser for SOS Children's Villages South Africa, said she regarded Kellerman as one of the finest philanthropists



CHARITABLE NOTE: Wouter Kellerman with an alto instrument, which is relatively rare in the flute world. Picture: KEVIN SUTHERLAND

around.

The musician had also given the organisation R325 000 to build a house in Rustenburg.

"He has a big heart for children's needs," she said. Kellerman's "world music" — a combination of African, Asian and classical sounds — has enthralled audiences in Germany, China, the US, Australia, France and the Seychelles.

He also won a South African Music Award last year for his DVD *Kellerman Colour Line*.

The former engineer will be performing at the Victory Theatre in Houghton Estate, Johannesburg, on Friday and on Saturday.

## Rabbi heaps praise on SA racial harmony

ROWAN PHILP

A FORMER friend of Michael Jackson known as "America's rabbi" has showered praise on South Africa in a major column in the US.

Calling it "quite simply, one of the finest places in the world to visit".

Bestselling author and controversial TV personality Rabbi Shmuley Boteach wrote "An American marvels at South Africa", carried on the Huffington Post this week, after a lecture visit to the country.

Having previously criticised South Africa for its condemnations of Israel's policies, Boteach claimed in this week's article to have witnessed "the miracle of racial harmony" in Gauteng. He said this was not so much the case in Cape Town.

"In Johannesburg and elsewhere it's an incredible thing to see whites and blacks living and interacting together as if nothing had ever kept them apart."

The column generated heated debate on the

Post's site, with one person writing: "Boteach must have seen a different South Africa than the one I saw."

Boteach supported Jackson through his accusations of child molestation, then fell out with the star and released "The Michael Jackson tapes" in 2009, detailing private, taped conversations between the two.

Newsweek magazine rated him the seventh most influential rabbi in the US that year. Boteach was a frequent guest of Oprah Winfrey.

This week the rabbi concluded: "All the residents agree the crime has subsided dramatically and the South African economy seems to be growing a lot better than it is in the United States."

"While there are still some shanty towns, South Africa strikes one as modern, forward-looking, and upbeat. It has all the flavour of Africa yet set in a first world economy. It has lessons to share with all the world about racial coexistence."

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