



Julia Kempe, researcher at the University of Paris, won in 2006 a scientists' prize co-sponsored by the EADS Corporate Foundation

Social Responsibility by encouraging female scientists

Julia Kempe: Winner of the 2006 Irène Joliot-Curie Prize

For Julia Kempe, prizes are no rarity. Over time, this former student of one of East Germany's special schools for gifted children has collected many well-deserved distinctions for her research in computer science. These have been awarded by well-known academic institutions and government bodies from across the world.

But the Irène Joliot-Curie Prize, which she won last November as the best young female researcher of 2006, is one of the most prestigious. It is dedicated to encouraging young women in science – a cause that is close to her heart.

“I think the Irène Joliot-Curie Prize is one of several things that would help a woman overcome her own doubts,” says Kempe. She adds: “Seeing other women being successful helps. There should be more outreach activities and events for women. I think women still need a lot more encouragement.”

The prize, which is co-sponsored by the EADS Corporate Foundation and the French Ministry of Higher Education and Research is intended to reward female scientists for exceptional achievements. Its purpose is also to encourage young women to embark on scientific careers. While the reward is a cash sum of € 10,000, its real value is the associated prestige.

Successful career as a scientist

Aged 33, Kempe has worked or studied at many of the world's leading faculties in the field of computer science. She is currently a researcher at the University of Paris in Orsay, but has previously attended leading universities in Australia, Austria, France, Israel and the United States.

Kempe's studies began when she was selected at the age of 11 to study mathematics and physics in East Germany. She remarks that being female was no disadvantage; her potential was regarded as exactly the same as that of her male classmates. At the age of 17, however, one year after the Berlin Wall fell, she moved with her parents to Austria. There, women were not expected to study mathematics or sciences. France, she observes, is far more egalitarian.

Mixity to work better

Yet there are still relatively few women in the classes she teaches at the university. “I do not know why this is the case,” she says. “Maybe it is the lack of role models. When I see young women I always try to show them that they have their place in research and that mixity creates better working environment.”

Kempe's work focuses on the emerging field of quantum computing. She develops quantum algorithms which should ultimately lead to the first quantum computer. If this is achieved, it will lead to far more powerful computers than those of today.

Meanwhile, this most recent prize may help her career to progress in practical ways. “One of the previous winners told me at the awards ceremony that all of her colleagues were aware of this prize,” she says. “I do not think it helped in the sense that she got promoted but it made her life a little easier. She said the real hurdle in a woman's career was when it came to getting a leadership position.”