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Alumnus of the Year 2024 Jury report

The University of Groningen is proud of its alumni. They are our ambassadors, our ties to society. Every year, we award one of our alumni the title Alumnus of the Year. The prize is an expression of appreciation and encouragement. The title is awarded to a UG alumnus who, in our eyes, has made an extraordinary contribution to society, academia and/or culture, is a source of inspiration for others and shows promise for the future.

The alumnus of the year 2024 is Stef van Grieken, tech entrepreneur, co-founder and CEO of Cradle.

Stef van Grieken (1986) obtained a Master's degree in Industrial Engineering and Management at the University of Groningen in 2014.

During his studies, he was already highly active in the digital world. He organized hackathons and as founder or board member, he was closely involved in initiatives such as Het Nieuwe Stemmen, Hack de Overheid, and the Open State Foundation, aimed at making the government and institutions digitally transparent and aware.

Subsequently, he had a dream career in Silicon Valley at Google. Long before ChatGPT became popular, he already worked on machine learning and AI-models at Google X and Google Brain.

Two years ago, he changed course because, in his own words:

'I am incredibly grateful to Google for allowing me to take part in the early stages of the current AI-developments. But if, in the future, my daughters ask me: 'Where were you when the Earth was on fire?', the wrong answer will be: I was a plumber in a very large advertising agency.'

Together with Jelle Prins of Uber, he launched Cradle, a platform that uses AI to accelerate the developments of practical, applicable proteins. Just as ChatGPT can help write a text, Cradle's AI helps to find the most promising protein constructs that can be used for a medicine or an alternative for plastic, milk, or a detergent, for

example. As a result, the development time of these products can be drastically reduced.

Even though the use of AI is complex and sometimes controversial in our society, Stef shows that you can also do very useful things with it, that can actually help society progress.

He is therefore rightfully the Alumnus of the Year 2024.

This year, the jury of the Alumnus of the Year award consisted of:

Jacquelien Scherpen, Rector Magnificus, chair

Christiaan Triebert, investigative journalist, Alumnus of the Year 2018

Lisa Herzog, Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy

Remco Kouwenhoven, Director of Alumni Relations & Philanthropy / Ubbo Emmius Fund

Previous winners

2023 – Takudzwa Mutezo (1992) environmental lawyer who fights both legally and administratively against illegal international animal trade / sustainable farmer in Zimbabwe

2022* – Iris de Graaf (1991) Russia correspondent for the national Dutch broadcaster NOS, Slavonic Languages and Russian Studies

2020 – Laurien Meuter (1976), founder of the Tiny Miracles Foundation, Economics

2019 – Sander de Hosson (1977), pulmonologist and trailblazer for good palliative care, Medicine

2018 - Christiaan Triebert (1991), visual investigative journalist at the New York Times / Bellingcat, IRIO

2017 - Carolien de Bruin (1977), founder of C-Change which helps international businesses and organizations achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, Business and Finance

2016 - Merel Rumping (1984), founder of Carewithinreach, orthopedagogical care accessible to all, IRIO

2015 - Luuk van Middelaar (1973), writer, professor and expert on Europe, History/Philosophy

2014 - Monica Arac de Nyeko (1979), Ugandan writer and humanitarian specialist at UNICEF, on the Africa39 list and winner of the Caine Prize 2007, the film Rafiki is based on her short story about two lesbian girls, Humanitarian Assistance

2013 - Wim Pijbes (1961) former director of the Rijksmuseum, Art History

2012 - Matthijs Bierman (1964), director of Triodos Bank, Business and Law 2011 -

Stine Jensen (1972), philosopher, writer, programme maker, Philosophy 2010 - Jelle

Brandt Corstius (1978) writer, programme maker, History

2009 - Jeroen Smit (1963), journalist, writer, Business

* as from 2022, the prize bears the year of presentation of the award