

JURGEN TIEKSTRA

ABROAD



FOTO PRIVÉ

Wim Velema

'At lunch time you find yourself queuing up with Nobel laureates'

It's six o'clock in the evening. Darkness has fallen in Groningen. Outside it's bleak and wet. On the other side of the world, on the west coast of the US, Wim Velema (30) picks up his mobile phone. It's nine o'clock in the morning there. The sky overhead is bright blue. The forecast is for twenty degrees. He is at Stanford University campus, close to San Francisco. 'Things here are on a vast scale', he says. 'When I first arrived, I thought: I'm living on campus, so I'll be able to walk everywhere. But that's not possible. You really need a car.' Velema moved to California in 2014 to work in Eric Kool's chemistry lab at Stanford. He is researching a new technique for identifying abnormalities in human DNA that occur frequently in cancers. That same year he had left Ben Feringa's research group, where he had been able to set up a biology lab, in collaboration with postdoc Wiktor Szymański, after completing his pharmacy studies.

With Feringa as his mentor, Velema earned his PhD with distinction for research into antibiotics that can be switched on and off. (The secret lay in the molecules that can be

controlled remotely using light, so that they only work in the intended part of the body and therefore have fewer side effects.) 'It was a special time with him. He was a mentor for me, and not just when it came to chemistry. Ben himself is a creative person and highly motivating. I would leave his office very enthusiastic after every discussion with him.'

Armed with an NWO scholarship, he flew to the west coast of the US. At Stanford, a private university founded by the industrialist Leland Stanford, he found a scientific Valhalla. 'This is one of the best universities in the world, certainly in the field of chemistry. At lunch time you find yourself queuing up with Nobel laureates'. The campus is fantastic, everything is beautifully maintained. You can see that there's lots of money here.'

Enormously wealthy

In fact: 'This is a very strange environment. Everyone is so enormously wealthy here and everything is so ridiculously expensive. I pay two thousand dollars for a small studio room. This is Silicon Valley. All the major tech companies are located here and they attract lots of highly qualified people. I read recently that the head of the fire service in San Francisco could no longer afford a house in his own city. I don't think that's how it should be. I've heard that Atherton, a village near here, is the richest postcode in the US. It's 'Center Parcs meets Ritz-Carlton' here. There's a rather strange atmosphere.'

Hillary Clinton recently came to the Valley to raise funds for her campaign, but the real election battle bypassed California. The state has been a Democrat stronghold for years, so there was huge dissatisfaction about Donald Trump's win. The university even sent out a mail drop, which said: 'Regardless of what you think about it, we want everyone to belong: we don't want a climate in which people are polarized and excluded.'