

# Proud as Punch

RECORDED BY MARJAN BROUWERS

ELMER STERKEN



I used my phone to take this photo of Ben Feringa surrounded by cheering students on 5 October and it has gone right around the world. We had just heard that he'd won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry, 63 years after Frits Zernike won the Nobel Prize in Physics. The photo was viewed 73,000 times on Twitter, and Ben appeared on the Dutch talk show *De Wereld Draait Door* and on the front page of the Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant*. Technically, it's not even a good photo, but I pressed the button at just the right time. You can see Ben standing there, his usual calm and modest self, and you can see the joy on the faces of the people around him. You can also see what a diverse group they are: there are no fewer than seventeen different nationalities working in his lab. This prize is not only marvellous for Ben himself, for his institute, the Faculty and the University, but for everyone here. What's most important for us is the vitality, the atmosphere, that we exude as a result. Ben Feringa has really put Groningen on the map once more, both nationally and internationally, and that's something we're all immensely proud of.

That wonderful day in October Ben received a standing ovation in the Chemistry lecture theatre that went on for at least ten minutes. It was an emotional moment. And yet he still had the presence of mind, at the press conference that followed, to go on to talk about the importance of science. Conducting fundamental research means venturing into uncharted territory. It takes lots of time and you can't say beforehand what the benefits will be for society, or whether these experiments will even lead to tangible applications. As Ben himself puts it: The Wright brothers didn't

know that either when they first flew thirty metres in their 'soap box'. Exploratory research can also fail. But by the same token, an unintended outcome can lead to a wonderful discovery. That's why Ben encourages his students to take risks and to experience for themselves how experiments can turn out differently from what was expected. Scientists like him need to be given time to explore, and to puzzle and try things out. That's incredibly important if you want to make scientific advances. It has to be done, and for that you need courage, persistence, time, people and money.

This Nobel Prize hasn't just come out of nowhere. Ben has won prestigious awards for his research in the past, which makes him a fantastic ambassador for science and for Groningen. Apart from six years working with Shell, he has spent his entire study and working career in Groningen. This prize means a lot to all of us: for our rankings, for securing grants, for our ability to attract international students and for scientists. The Nobel Prize is in fact a stamp of quality for this university.

Ben feels that he has much to be grateful for at the UG – hence his Nobel Prize address in the Martinikerk on 30 November. On 10 December he will be in Stockholm, sitting on the podium with the other winners, though Bob Dylan will not be there, alas. I am deeply honoured that Ben has invited Sibrand Poppema and myself to attend. This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience and I'm really looking forward to it!

**Elmer Sterken, rector magnificus**