

art sport science culture

Jewish Report Art, Sport, Science & Culture Award

PROFESSOR VALERIE MIZRAHI



Professor Valerie Mizrahi beat an eminent list of nominees to take the Jewish Report Art, Sport, Science & Culture Award.

Born and raised in Harare, Valerie was the second daughter of Morris and Etty Mizrahi. After finishing school in Zimbabwe, she moved to UCT, where she did a BSc degree in Chemistry and Maths before obtaining her PhD in Chemistry in 1983.

She worked in the US for several years before returning to South Africa in 1989 to establish a research unit at the South African Institute for Medical Research and Wits University, where she remained until 2010. During her 20 years at Wits and the National Health Laboratory Service in Joburg, she built a world-class programme in TB research.

"I am extremely close to my family and very proud of my Sephardi heritage, from both sides of the family," says Valerie, who belongs to the Cape Town Sephardi Shul. Her parents have just celebrated their 60th anniversary. "My kids are everything to me, and my parents and sister who all live in Johannesburg."

"It is a great honour to be recognised by my own community," Valerie says of her Award, "and I think that it's great that Science is included." Prof Mizrahi says that, especially "in the SA context, and partly as a woman, if it could in some way encourage young people to look at science as a career and say 'that's pretty cool' it would be nice."

"I am being paid to do what I love," says Valerie, who hopes her award will inspire others to look at science as a career.

In 2011 Valerie moved to UCT as director of the Institute of Infectious Disease and Molecular Medicine, a major postgraduate research institute where world-class scientists work together to tackle the major diseases in Africa. She also directs an extramural research unit of the South African Medical Research Council and leads the UCT node of the DST/NRF Centre of Excellence for Biomedical TB Research, a major, multi-institutional research centre, which she co-founded in 2004.

Valerie's research is aimed at understanding the biology of the TB bacterium with a view to contributing to the development of new tools to control TB - a devastating disease that claims 1.4 million lives a year across the world and is the leading cause of death in SA.

In 2009, Valerie was awarded an "A" rating from the National Research Foundation of South Africa, having been recognised by her peers as a world leader in her field. She has published more than 110 papers and book chapters. She is a very active participant in the global TB research community and is a passionate advocate for TB research. She has organised major international conferences in this field.

In 2007, Valerie received the Order of the Mapungubwe (Silver) from the SA State President in recognition of her contributions to biochemistry, molecular biology and tuberculosis research in this country. Her other major awards include the 2000 Unesco-L'Oréal For Women in Science Award (Africa and Middle East Region), the Department of Science and Technology Distinguished Woman Scientist Award and the Gold and Silver Medals of the South African Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology.

In 2013 Valerie was awarded the prestigious Christophe Mérieux Prize from the Mérieux Foundation and Institut de France in Paris in recognition of her contributions to TB research and training in Africa.

Valerie is an Associate Fellow of the Academy of Sciences of the Developing World, a Fellow of the Royal Society of South Africa, a Member of the Academy of Science of South Africa, and a Fellow of the American Academy of Microbiology. She has served on the Board of Directors of the KZN Research Institute for TB and HIV, and the Council of Scientific Advisors of the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology in Italy.

Prof Mizrahi currently serves on the Scientific Advisory Boards of K-RITH, the Global Alliance for TB Drug Development (New York), and Innovative New Medicines for Tuberculosis (Lausanne), and on the Discovery Expert Group of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Seattle).

During her career, Valerie has trained more than 40 postgraduate students. The majority of her trainees have remained involved in biomedical research and some have moved into leadership positions at institutions in South Africa and abroad.

When she's not on an aeroplane, Valerie lives in Cape Town with her two daughters, Dani and Natalie Sher - who are both studying at UCT.

One of Valerie's most significant accolades is that she was an International Research Scholar of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute from 2000 to 2010 and was subsequently selected as a Senior International Research Scholar of the HHMI from 2012 to 2017.