

## CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Acceptance Speech by Prof. Laurence Steinberg

Klaus J. Jacobs Research Prize Winner

3 December 2009

Mrs. Jacobs, Dr. Jacobs, and other members of the Jacobs family; Councillor Couchepin and Councillor Cotti; Rektor Fischer; Professor Stock; Members of the Foundation's Board of Trustees and the Jacobs Prize Jury; Father Casutt, Distinguished Guests, and Family and Friends:

I am deeply honored, humbled, and thrilled beyond words to receive the Klaus Jacobs prize. When I received the telephone call from the Foundation informing me that I had been selected, I was momentarily speechless. Those of you who know me, know that "speechless" generally is not a word that is used to describe me. Let me assure you that, although I am making a speech this evening, the excitement and shock of having been chosen as the first recipient of this magnificent award have not worn off.

It is a particular honor to have such a good friend and longstanding colleague make this presentation. Anne Petersen is one of the founders of the modern scientific study of adolescence, and her thinking has greatly influenced me and thousands of other scholars. I also want to note that the jury who selected me is composed of some of the most important scientists in the world – not only in the field of adolescence – but in all of social science. I owe them a special thanks, not only for

selecting me, but for serving on the jury and thereby eliminating competitors for the prize who are surely more deserving than I.

And thank you all for coming to this wonderful event. Although Father Casutt and I are being honored this evening, our focus this evening should rightly be on the life and work of Klaus J. Jacobs. I am sorry to have never met Mr. Jacobs. I have heard from colleagues who had the pleasure of meeting and working with him that he was a brilliant, warm, compassionate man, a person of legendary generosity and unsurpassed concern for the well-being of young people around the world. I cannot imagine an individual whose name is better associated with a prize given to advance productive youth development.

Although we never met, Klaus Jacobs and I crossed paths indirectly more than 20 years ago. After I was notified about the prize, I informed a few people whom I knew would appreciate the significance of the award. Naturally, I wanted to share the news with my current and former graduate students, without whose collaboration my own research would not have been possible. My first doctoral student, Susan Silverberg Koerner, who is now a professor at the University of Arizona, sent me a lovely story by email. After Sue completed her doctoral studies with me in 1986, she came to Germany to study as a postdoctoral fellow with Paul Baltes, at the Max Planck Institute. One day, Professor Baltes received a call from Klaus Jacobs asking him to meet with a small group of advisors, including Anne Petersen and Rainer Silbereisen, to discuss how the Jacobs family might best support work in the field of youth development. Professor Baltes, who mentored so many young scholars during his

career, asked Susan to accompany him to the meeting as the “scientific secretary,” in order to take notes and prepare a scientific summary of the discussion. That very meeting led to the formation and direction of the Jacobs Foundation. So in this way, my connection with Klaus Jacobs dates back more than two decades.

He and I share much more than this indirect association, however. Naturally, we share a passion for doing work that will improve the lives of young people. This is not merely a selfless mission. Without investing in children and youth today, we risk our own futures – all of our futures. More than that, however, I share with Klaus Jacobs the steadfast belief that we must draw on the best and most rigorous science to direct us in our endeavors to foster productive youth development. It is important to support the sorts of interventions and programs that have been sustained by the Jacobs Foundation and other organizations over the past decades. But it is equally important – perhaps more so – to ensure that these efforts are designed in a way that is guided and supported by scientific knowledge. The Jacobs prize is particularly meaningful to me because I have devoted my career to doing good science that has direct application to young people’s lives. The prize will enable me to continue this line of inquiry.

The prize is important to me for another reason, one that has nothing to do with my own work. Almost all scientific prizes of the extraordinary magnitude of the Jacobs prize are awarded for contributions to biomedical research. Without diminishing the importance of this area of research, it is worth pondering for a moment what the creation of the

Jacobs prize says to the world about the scientific study of adolescent development. So I hope that this prize, and the example I hope to set, inspires other scientists to work to understand adolescent development, to discover how we can prevent and treat the problems that disproportionately affect young people, and to learn how best to facilitate productive youth development. I take this responsibility especially seriously as the prize's first laureate.

I have been asked many times how I plan to use this most generous prize. Some colleagues jokingly ask whether I plan to spend the million francs on coffee and chocolate, to which I respond that as long as I use the coffee and chocolate to do good research on adolescent development, it remains an open possibility. In all seriousness, however, I have a general idea of how I will use the award, but I have not formulated specific plans. As you now know from Fritz Karmann's lovely film, I study the harmful consequences of impulsive decision-making in the face of an attractive reward. So I think it would set a terrible example to make a rash or impetuous decision. I can say that my overarching intent is to take the work my colleagues and I have been doing and extend it to other parts of the world – not only Europe, but Africa, Asia, and South America – to see whether and how patterns of adolescent development unfold in contexts that differ from those we study in the United States. After all, American teenagers do not own the world's market on risky, reckless, and health-compromising behavior, and understanding how to foster healthy development during this vulnerable period of life is an important enterprise all over the world. I have begun discussions with a colleagues who are now conducting a comparative,

cross-national study of children from 14 countries, and we exploring the possibility of joining forces and working together as these children begin the transition from childhood into adolescence. So please stay tuned.

I want to take this opportunity to thank not only the Jacobs Foundation, and the wonderful and talented individuals on the foundation's staff, with whom I have been working now for more than two months, but also some very special people without whom I would not have been able to conduct the research that I've done. I had the benefit of two brilliant mentors, John Hill and Urie Bronfenbrenner, who instilled in me a love for studying adolescent development and a passion for doing science that could inform public policy and practice. Every single study I have ever conducted has been a collaborative effort, and I am indebted to the many colleagues and students with whom I have had the good fortune to work over the past 35 years. I wish I could name them all, but the listing is far too long. I hope they know that although I am keeping the actual prize to myself, I at least share the honor with them. I am also exceedingly grateful to the many organizations who have funded and supported my research and, especially, to Temple University, my academic home for the past 21 years.

As an adolescent, I was blessed with the very sort of family and schools that enable productive youth development, and I have my parents and brother to thank for that. My mother passed away several years ago, but my father, Irwin, and my brother, Andy, are here tonight, which is just wonderful. Finally, and most importantly, I thank my son, Benjamin and my wife, Wendy. I have thrived because of the love, support, nurturance,

and intellectual stimulation that they have always given me. In fact, Ben was a research assistant on the project in which we first discovered the peer effect, and has often served as an informal consultant when we were developing and pilot testing measures. When he was 11, he sat in on one of my research meetings and when the meeting was over, said “You don’t know the first thing about 11-year-olds.” He then made some helpful suggestions, which we followed. Wendy has discussed all aspects of my work with me for more than 28 years, and has always been interested, enthusiastic, and wise. In fact, both of them have been so important to my work that I am now going to embarrass them and ask them to stand for a moment so that you can acknowledge their contributions, too.

Let me conclude with some words from Klaus Jacobs himself. In his 2007 address to the World Scout Foundation, an organization that held a special place in his heart, Mr. Jacobs said, “You and I believe that young people are crucial to social change and development in today’s world. If we can harness their imagination, their ideals and visions, their hope, energy and enthusiasm, we can make a difference.”

Thank you for enabling me to continue to try make a difference in the lives of children and adolescents all over the world.