

Drive behind Nobel Medicine Prize say winners

October 7 2013, by Kerry Sheridan

A German-born neuroscientist who describes himself as "incredibly driven" was actually driving around in Spain when his phone rang Monday with the news that he'd [won the Nobel Prize](#).

On the other end of the line was not the friend Thomas Suedhof expected was calling to check up on him, but a spokesman for the Nobel Prize committee in Stockholm, Sweden.

"Are you serious? Oh, my God," Suedhof said in a trembling voice, upon learning that he, along with American colleagues James Rothman and Randy Schekman, had won the 2013 Nobel Prize for Medicine.

"I'm sorry. This is a little unexpected."

The three won for their work on how cells organize their cargo and move molecules—a process that contributes to normal body and brain function but is also at the root of neurological diseases, diabetes, and immune disorders.

Suedhof's work focuses on how synapses form in the brain and how messages get sent, with a view to unlocking the mysteries of Alzheimer's disease and autism.

Colleagues say his work ethic is astounding, and he is renowned for his high productivity.

"My wife thinks I am crazy," he told the Nobel Committee spokesman.

"I don't know. I am incredibly driven. I didn't think I was when I was young. I thought I was normal. But as I get older and I see the other people around me, I feel sometimes that that is the way I am."

Suedhof is an American citizen and his lab is at Stanford University in California. He was born in Germany in 1955.

He was described as a "great scientist" and a "wonderful collaborator" by co-winner James Rothman of Yale University who studies how cells transport energy outside of themselves.

Rothman, 63, said he learned of the Nobel award by a phone call at 4:30 am.

"It made me feel awake, and rather good," he told a press conference, which was squeezed in before the two classes he was scheduled to teach later in the afternoon.

Rothman praised his co-laureates as men whose work had at times been "complementary, and sometimes competitive."

Rothman said he has worked closely over the years with Suedhof and Schekman, who teaches at the University of California, Berkeley.

Schekman and Rothman shared the Lasker Award for basic medical research in 2002, considered among the most prestigious in science and sometimes referred to as America's Nobel. Suedhof also won the Lasker Award in 2013.

Schekman is best known for his work on cell organization in yeast and for identifying three classes of genes that control different parts of the

cell transport system.

Schekman, 64, "is no stranger to achievement," said a [university](#) spokesman who introduced him at a press conference.

At a press conference, Schekman recalled his middle class origins and early rejections, including how he was turned down for research grants at the dawn of his career.

When he'd risen through a ranks a bit, at one point he was told "now you can publish that crap of yours" in a journal called the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, of which he later became editor-in-chief.

He attributed his success to having had a good mentor when he was getting started in science, and to his current role teaching undergraduates.

"It helps me be able to explain myself to audiences that don't know about my work," he said.

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