EDUCATION

Nobel laureate urges students toward science

Randy Schekman calls his career ‘nothing but a wonderful life’

BY DONNA JONES
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WATSONVILLE — Randy Schekman mowed lawns and baby-sat, saved his earnings and, at age 12, bought his first microscope.

Today, that microscope, purchased at a Southern California pawn shop, sits in the Nobel Museum in Stockholm, Sweden. The exhibit honors Schekman, who, with two other scientists, won the 2013 Nobel Prize in medicine in October.

Wednesday, the Nobel laureate and UC Berkeley professor spoke to an audience of Pajaro Valley students and teachers at the Mello Center. In science, Schekman said, you start with the fundamentals, and there’s no telling where you’ll end up.

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“As for me, it’s been nothing but a wonderful life,” he said.

Schekman won the Nobel for his work in cell biology, and led the audience through a brief science lesson that explained the importance of his research. He said others had figured out that cells manufactured proteins and distributed them through tiny structures known as vesicles. Working with baker’s yeast, he was able to identify the genes required to make the system work.

Among other practical applications, his research has led to the use of yeast and human genes to manufacture insulin, largely replacing a product based on pig insulin to treat diabetes.

Schekman, the brother of Pajaro Valley Unified School District Assistant Superintendent Murry Schekman, recalled a teacher who nurtured his passion for science but said having the opportunity to experiment was critical to his development as a scientist.

“You take what you learn in class and apply it with your own initiative and creativity in the lab and there’s no way you can predict where things will go,” he said.

For Schekman, it’s been a career devoted to research. He said he enjoys the time spent in his lab, trying to answer fundamental questions. But since he won the Nobel, he’s been on the road, making speeches. In addition to the Mello Center event Wednesday, Schekman spoke to the Watsonville Rotary, met with Pajaro Valley science teachers planning to implement new state academic standards, and was scheduled for an evening presentation at Cabrillo College, events sponsored by the school district and Santa Cruz County College Commitment, also known as S4C.

Schekman said so much attention is devoted to movie stars and sports figures.

“Maybe I can persuade people to take up the life of the mind,” he said.

After Schekman’s talk, Watsonville High School senior Cesar Garcia, 17, stood in a long line of autograph-seekers. He’s been accepted to Yale, and is interested in ecology. He found Schekman’s comments on the importance of hands-on experience noteworthy as he’s participated in science fairs and internships.

“He was kind of inspiring,” Garcia said.

Classmate Ileana Konviser, 17, nodded in agreement. She’s headed to Cal Poly to study electrical engineering in the fall.

“Follow your dreams,” she said.

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