

Dame Jocelyn Bell Burnell

Jocelyn is a Northern Irish born astrophysicist and astronomer, with a lifetime of inspiring scientific leadership in research, education and public service.

Born 1943 in Lurgan to Quaker parents.

Didn't excel at Lurgan College, where girls were supposed to study less academic subjects. Aged 13, her parents sent her to The Mount School, York, a Quaker boarding school, where she flourished. She then went to Glasgow University, followed by post-grad studies in radio-astronomy at New Hall, Cambridge.

Part of a team which built the 4-acre radio telescope to monitor quasars. Jocelyn painstakingly analysed reams of paper output, spotting curious signals in the data which were discovered to be a new type of object, later named pulsars.

Findings published in 1968, with Jocelyn's name second on the paper, to huge media interest: her supervisor was asked about astrophysics, Jocelyn quizzed about boyfriends and hair colour!

The 2 senior professors awarded Nobel Prize for the discovery, which Jocelyn accepted with good grace.

Married to a civil servant, Jocelyn had to move around the country with him, so worked at Southampton, London, and Edinburgh, and also from 1973 working with the Open University, where in 1991 she became Professor of Physics, doubling the number of women physics professors in the UK.

Jocelyn has received numerous accolades and awards, becoming a Dame in 2007 for her services to astronomy. In 2018 she received a Special Breakthrough Prize in Fundamental Physics, and donated all the £2.3 million prize money to the Bell Burnell Graduate Scholarship Fund which assists female, ethnic minority and refugee students in their research. Jocelyn said she felt that not being awarded the Nobel prize had perhaps led to her being given many other awards instead, enabling her to promote and support others in physics.

A quote from Jocelyn: "Women of my generation who've stayed in science have done it by playing men at their own game."

Why did I choose Jocelyn? She is not only a brilliant scientist, but also wonderfully humble, humane, and practical, never allowing obstacles to divert her. She has inspired countless students of physics, and also written books and given many lectures about her faith. She is a joy to listen to, which you can, as there are several programmes in which she features on BBC Sounds: Desert Island Discs, The Life Scientific, Women's Hour, The New Elizabethans, etc