

Kristen Nygaard

Norway has lost one of its best known scientists and scholars. Professor Kristen Nygaard died suddenly August 10 at 75 years old. Nygaard was best known in Norway as the leader of the No side in the debate over Norway joining the European Union, but internationally he will always be remembered as the co-creator of the programming language Simula. The computer systems that form the foundation of the modern information society are among the most complex things humans have created. Through his ground-breaking research Nygaard made it possible to manage that complexity.

Kristen Nygaard received his Masters degree in Mathematics from the University of Oslo in 1956. He worked for the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment until 1960, then for many years with the Norwegian Computing Center before becoming a Professor at the University of Oslo. Simula was developed in the 1960's by Kristen and the recently deceased Professor Ole-Johan Dahl. These two pioneers have been recognised for Simula and the paradigm shift that it introduced. They were awarded the John von Neumann medal in 2001 and the Turing prize in 2002, considered the 'Nobel prize' in informatics.

Kristen made an impression on all who met him, with his vitality, seemingly limitless knowledge, wit, self-irony and not least his open, generous and friendly personality. He created a unique commitment among those of us who had the pleasure of Kristen as either an advisor or colleague. Kristen was clear about what his goals were, but he also listened to good advice. He was at home with other internationally acclaimed researchers but was just as interested in talking to young students. In a class of 20-30, he knew all their names after the first lecture. Kristen had an enormous group of contacts, both in Norway and internationally. Even in his last year he made presentations to groups in Europe, North and South America and Asia. He was a living legend who was met with deep respect around the world.

Kristen was incredibly versatile. While always following the latest news on the technology front he developed the Information Systems Group at the University of Oslo and worked with the labour movement to study the impact of information technology on people and society. This dimension of his work was recognised in 1990 when he received the Norbert Wiener Award for Professional and Social Responsibility.

Kristen always believed in victory in the Norwegian EU campaign. His optimism was also reflected in his vision regarding research questions that many dismissed as unrealistic. Despite the fact that modern science is based on a large number of people building up steadily one block at a time, Kristen was open to totally new avenues of thinking and was not afraid of being seen as naïve.

Like politics, scientific research was a calling for Kristen. On top of "normal" office hours, he held five-hour tutorials in his flat in Oslo, round-the-clock marathons to complete proposals to the Research Council of Norway and lively discussions in more festive settings. Kristen never rested on his laurels. He was about to assume a three-year full-time position to develop new methods for teaching computer programming at the IT research centre that bears the name of his creation, Simula.

It is with great sadness that we must acknowledge that our good friend and colleague is no longer with us. We will miss Kristen greatly, but he lives on as a source of professional and personal inspiration. As he said himself a few months ago, with a gleam in his eye, "if, after my death, you all look very carefully at my portrait that hangs in Simula's reception area, you will see that I am still following what you are doing here."

On behalf of the Simula Research Laboratory,
Dag Sjøberg, Professor