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Luminary of laser technology approaches retirement

Reinhart Poprawe, director of the Fraunhofer Institute for Laser Technology ILT, is one of the most notable figures in the field of industrial laser technology, both in Germany and worldwide. So what are his plans now that he is approaching retirement?

When Reinhart Poprawe discovered at the age of 12 that there was no map of the universe, he couldn't believe his ears. All at once, he realized just how many unexplained things there must still be in the world – and he vowed to make a difference.

Poprawe remains true to laser technology

In the 1970s, while studying physics in California, he was astonished to see what was then the world's biggest laser. From that point on, his career became increasingly entwined with the development of laser technology. In 1985, he joined the Fraunhofer Institute for Laser Technology in Aachen as a department head. He subsequently moved to Thyssen, but his enthusiasm for lasers never waned and he eventually returned to Fraunhofer ILT. In 1996, Poprawe took over as director of the ILT. That same year, he was appointed to the chair of laser technology at RWTH Aachen University. In this latter role, he encourages people to look beyond their familiar horizons, providing staff with an impressive 30,000 square meters of space on campus to work in interdisciplinary teams.

Aachen becomes major hub of laser technology

Poprawe is always open to new ideas, arguing that this is the only way to fuel innovation. This receptiveness has now become an integral part of the institute's culture. The research complex as a whole has grown from 250 to 800 staff over

the past 20 years, giving rise to more than 30 new companies in the process. More about his idea of openness as part of the institute's culture Prof. Poprawe has revealed in an interview with our editorial staff. Aachen has become a major hub of laser technology in Germany and beyond, and Poprawe has become one of its most prominent figures, firmly enmeshed in the global laser community.

No boredom in retirement

This year Poprawe is set to retire. His career was recently rounded off by an honorary professorship at Tsinghua University in Beijing as well as the distinguished Arthur L. Schawlow Award, which he received for his many years of service at the Laser Institute of America (LIA). Whoever takes his place will preside over a truly integrated interdisciplinary institute that is regarded as one of the most prestigious laser centers worldwide with excellent facilities for research and development. Poprawe's next step is still undecided, but a map of the universe might well be in the cards!□

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