

UW professors land on Time 100 Most Influential People of 2022

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<https://komonews.com/news/local/uw-professor-named-on-time-100-most-influential-people-of-2022-for-human-genome-mapping>



Dr. Evan Eichler (UW Photo)

SEATTLE — On this year's edition of Time magazine's Most Influential People of 2022, readers will find the names of celebrity A-Listers like Oprah, President Joe Biden and actor Andrew Garfield.

Also on the esteemed list are two University of Washington researchers who made to the annual ranking for their work with human genome mapping.

Scientists Dr. Evan Eichler and Dr. Tulio de Oliveira said they didn't believe it when they found out about their selection.

Eichler spoke to KOMO News Friday, the same day the issue became available at local newsstands.

He said he thought his selection was a hoax.

“I actually sent a note to my secretary, and I said, ‘I think this is a mistake, this is a hoax, can you check it out for me,’” Eichler said. “And she wrote back in like 10 minutes and said, ‘This is no hoax,’ she said, ‘This is the real thing.’”

Eichler, a UW School of Medicine professor of genome sciences and Howard Hughes Medical Institute Investigator, has worked with genomes since the infamous Human Genome Project.

The project his team is being rewarded for finished mapping most of the human genome but his lab has been focusing on genetic variation and how it relates to disease and human evolution. The mapping finished off a small percentage the former project never finished and some thought too hard to work through.

The researcher calls it an honor for his name to be put on this list, especially after Noble Peace Prize winner Jennifer Doudna was the one to write about him and his team.

“It was really was really generous,” Eichler said. “Yeah, I mean, you know, we don't do these things for this type of accolade or recognition. I'm actually surprised that it was a Time 100 To be honest with you. But I also appreciate the fact that people think it's that important.”

Mapping the remaining genome changes the game for scientists, who now have a code to find out many things about how humans work.

However, the remaining part Eichler and his team mapped wasn't something a lot of people may have been willing to work on. This wasn't going to stop the team.

“Even though maybe many people moved on, I was like, committed to working on these regions, and I still think some of the most interesting biology and things that we're going to learn with respect to disease are still to come,” Eichler said.

But what does this mean to those who are not involved in the scientific community?

“Well, I mean, I don't want to overstate it, but I think it changes everything,” Dr. Eichler said. “Whenever we take another human genome, we map it, and we actually characterize variation from that person. So it's a person that's healthy or person has disease, we're trying to understand why the person has a genetic disease, we have to map it to a reference.”

The reference scientists have been using for two decades has always had holes, Eichler and his team now have put a stopper in those holes, meaning they can map data from anyone and use their map as a reference.

With the reference and maps, they can now discover things previously missed, find out what causes genetic diseases and more.

The discovery can help with many things, including – to an extent – the pandemic.

Eichler explained it could potentially identify both who and why some are more susceptible to viruses like this.

“By having this new reference, we actually improve our ability to find those people that are actually either susceptible, or predisposed, or protected from the disease,” Eichler explained.

What's next for Eichler and the team now?

To do it again.

“Because if you think about it, if these regions are really very different between you and me, right, simply having one reference is not enough, what we need is we need a reference that will represent all the populations of the world that will represent all the diversity in the world,” Eichler said.

As for the Time 100 list including extremely big names with his own, Eichler seems to still be in shock.

You know, I'm not a celebrity, and never will be," Eichler said. "But I am looking forward to going to the Gala in New York, to hopefully see some of these people in person. I think it would be kind of cool.

Eichler did not want anyone to forget his team who helped work to get the names on the list, which does not include the nearly 100-person team.

"There were 99 people that were involved in this entire project and I think, you know, the way I look at it, as we're standing there on behalf of all the work that they did, including all of my students, and post-docs, and, and students and post-docs from other labs, and so, I think we're figureheads, for what, what is really a bigger project involving a lot of young talent," Eichler said.

KOMO News reached out to researcher Tulio de Oliveira, who is currently out of the country. A story will be coming involving his work soon.

[You can find out more about the project and who worked on it here.](#)