

2001 Andrei Borisovich Vistelius Research Award

Another name has sprung to the heights of Mathematical Geology and Geostatistics. In little more than 3 years since graduating as a Ph.D. from the University of Leuven (Belgium), **Jef Caers** has rushed through all academic steps as a visiting scientist, a postdoc, a visiting professor, a co-director of one of the largest industrial affiliates program in the US, to win a tenure-track position at Stanford in a race where he was an outsider.



Consider the performance,

- 10 peer-reviewed papers in 5 different journals while he was still a student building a name in the field of extreme statistics;
- an average of 10 papers per year since graduating most of them published in prestigious peer-reviewed journals, building for himself a name in innovative applications of neural networks, the development of multiple-point geostatistics, and the integration of soft information;
- elected member of the Executive Council of the International Geostatistics Congress, the body that governs the field;
- made the short list of outstanding candidates to the tenure track position opened in the Petroleum Engineering Dpt. at Stanford, compete against bona fide petroleum engineers, geophysicists and geostatisticians all with vastly superior experience, and finally prevailed. Stanford has the reputation to always go for the candidate with greatest future potential no matter his age, experience or even background. If you are academically brilliant and willing to adapt, your original background is of little importance;
- and now the Vistelius Award, which rewards the most, promising young geoscientist.

This prize is, to my opinion, the top award of IAMG because it recognizes necessarily recent achievements and focus on potential for future greatness. We should honor our elders but the light of our association relies on the young ones.

I had recently a casual chat with Jef under clear skies, we both felt relaxed in the cocoon of Stanford campus, and then I asked him what specific event geared him towards an academic career. He said that as a graduate student he had little help, had to do the thinking mostly by himself and came to love research as a challenge to one's mind rather than mere learning from other people's mind. In the field of statistics of extremes, his Ph.D. topic, there was very little to learn from anyone anyway except that the world was either Gaussian or lognormal! He never believed in Central Limit theorems when applied to actual geo-data and he felt uneasy about the priority given by statisticians to parameter-poor models over actual data: the data could never speak by themselves. Why would

an external analytical model be less adhoc than a model specially built to fit important traits of the data? This bias towards clean models, he thought was the consequence of the French mathematical bias pervading the next door French-speaking university. Jef is a proud Flemish Belgian!

He also said that discovering a result by himself before reading it gave him the greatest joy. He knew then that he would do research not as a bookworm but as an athlete constantly putting himself to the test. Forget the well-trodden paths where people tend to beat the same models adding an umpteen decimal, give your naivete a chance, think by yourself, contribute possibly little but with genuine new ideas.

I knew this man was of Stanford type, or is it of Silicon Valley type?

Actually, Jef did inquire for the possibility of research positions in his alma mater in Belgium. He was given a whole list of administrative hurdles where age and patience were the sesame, nobody ever asked him about what he wanted to research or how he would go about it, he had the top degree from the place, that seems to be enough, the rest was a question of being in the correct waiting list! At Stanford they did not care about his degree or age, they looked at what he did recently and wanted to listen to him. They finally chose potential with its associated risk over past achievements.

Once again Europe's loss is America's gain, when will that brain drain ever end?

Let us cheer the newest Vistelius awardee!

With Jef Caers our association keeps its track record of early detection of future leaders.

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Stanford University