

Empowering diversity

AMOLF is actively stimulating diversity, and offering a variety of role models to students and junior researchers is one of its priorities. Two group leaders talk about the role models in their careers.

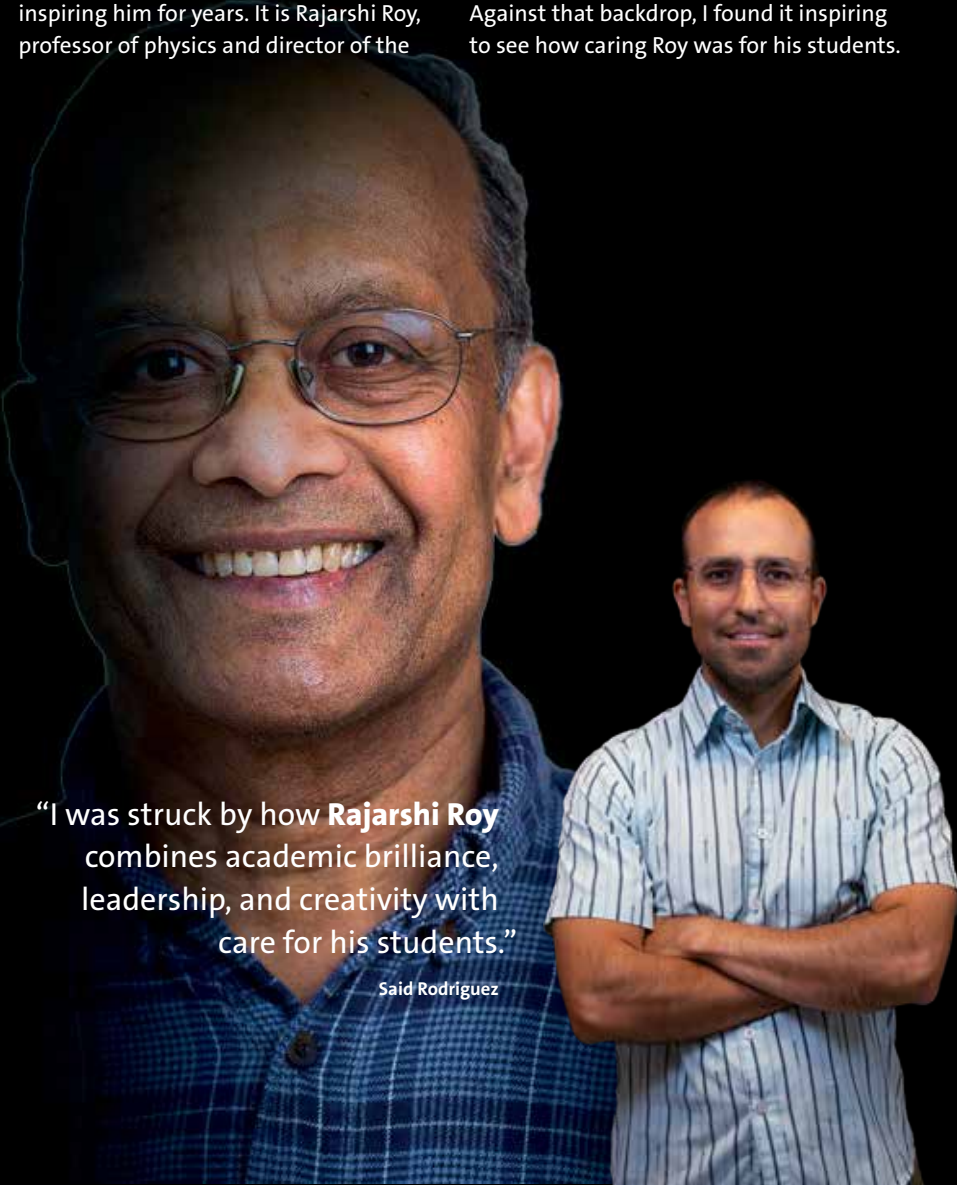
Text: Mariette Huisjes • Photos: Floris Krelage

“A role model is someone you admire, but not from a distance. You must recognize something in the person”, says Esther Alarcón LLadó, leader of the 3D Photovoltaics group at AMOLF and professor of nanoelectrochemistry at the University of Amsterdam. Maybe the same kind of upbringing, maybe gender, maybe character or personal style. The combination of admiration and recognition makes you want to follow in the role model’s footsteps. Of course you cannot become exactly like them, but you want to emulate some of the things the role model does well. For Esther, Anna Fontcuberta i Morral has been a role model. She is a physicist and material scientist at the Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne (and its future president as of 2025). She has a Spanish background like Esther and is equally a woman in a male-dominated work field. After hearing her speak at a conference, a spark flew and Esther applied to be a postdoc in the Fontcuberta lab, in which she succeeded. “I admire how she tackles challenges”, says Esther. “With an attitude that is both positive and pragmatic. And she always makes such a fresh impression; whenever you leave a conversation with her, you feel energized. She can be blunt, and tell the truth if it is important, but always in a caring way. After working with her for a few years, I realized how important role models are.”

Generous style

Said Rahimzadeh-Kalaleh Rodriguez is leader of the Interacting Photons group at AMOLF. After some reflection he also identifies a role model who has been inspiring him for years. It is Rajarshi Roy, professor of physics and director of the

Institute for Physical Science and Technology at the University of Maryland. Like Said himself, who grew up in Mexico, the Indian-born Roy belongs to an ethnic minority in a work field that has long been dominated by Europeans and North-Americans. “I have not actually worked with him, but I have interacted with him on a few occasions, and I was struck by how he combines academic brilliance, leadership and creativity with care for his students. In the academic rat race, being self-centred mostly pays off and those who act in a self-centred way then are presented to us as role-models. Against that backdrop, I found it inspiring to see how caring Roy was for his students.



“I was struck by how **Rajarshi Roy** combines academic brilliance, leadership, and creativity with care for his students.”

Said Rodríguez

He is also a strong champion for giving chances to minorities and supports this through his actions. For instance, Roy regularly gave workshops for students with challenging backgrounds from Africa and other places with little budget for higher education. He did experiments with them and taught them physics; I admire this generous style.”

AMOLF and diversity

AMOLF has been actively working on diversity since 2018. Some goals of the current plan are to safeguard an inclusive work culture and to improve the recruitment and career progression of underrepresented groups. There is an active Diversity, Equity, Inclusion (DEI) team, chaired by Esther. It initiates actions, evaluates progress and organizes all kinds of activities, such as the bi-

annual Diversity Day. “It is hard to put a finger on it, but my intuition is that since I entered AMOLF in 2017, it has become more diverse”, says Said. “To me, it is important that diversity should be sought not only in gender, but in ways of thinking. Such different perspectives may correlate with gender, but also with cultural background or neurodiversity. Academia needs people who think outside the box, who are not focussed so much on fixed protocols but more on the end results.” Esther is also satisfied with how things are going at AMOLF, especially with how young PhDs from minority groups seem more empowered nowadays, how they have found their voice and want to be part of the DEI team for instance. However, she warns that some privileged people mistakenly seem

to think the problem has now been solved. In reality, the old biases are not uprooted yet, and still some talented people get fewer opportunities than others. “We need to keep awareness alive.”

Choice in role models

Of course, as successful scientists and representatives of minorities, Esther and Said can also be role models themselves. Are they aware of that?

“I am aware but I also try to ignore it a bit, because I feel the pressure”, says Esther. “At the same time, I do realize the importance of someone with my background and gender managing to get a position at a prestigious institute such as AMOLF. After all, I had to move literally all around the globe to get where I am now; it’s good to show that this pays off in the end. I would have liked to have such a role model when I was a student.” Said also does not often stop to think about himself as a role model. “Unfortunately I have not gotten to the point yet where I can make the same investments in minority groups that Rajarshi Roy did. However, I am sometimes told that people find my provocative way of thinking inspiring. I like to challenge standard ways of thinking. Maybe that has something to do with my cultural background; we Mexicans are a bit more spicy than most Europeans.” The crux of the matter is that AMOLF strives to offer a diversity of role models, says Esther. Not only within the institute, but also when inviting guest speakers or visiting scholars. “There is not one role model that works for all. You need a variety of role models, so that young people can choose who they find inspiring. Maybe they have not one but several role models, from whose examples they construct their own style. Offering this option is certainly one of the goals we are working towards with our diversity policy.”



“Anna Fontcuberta i Morral always makes such a fresh impression; whenever you leave a conversation with her, you feel energized.”

Esther Alarcón LLadó