

## More honors for Chemistry's high-climbing Arlene Blum



Arlene Blum

Biochemist and mountaineer **Arlene Blum** Ph.D. '71, who won the \$100,000 Purpose Prize late last year for mobilizing society to protect its members by reducing toxic chemicals, has received still more honors in 2009, and the year isn't even half over.

Her undergraduate alma mater, Reed College, chose an alumnus or alumna from each department to write an essay for a 100th anniversary volume, and picked Blum to represent chemistry. In March, National Women's History Month, she was honored among the likes of Jane Goodall, Hilary Clinton, Sally Ride, and Alice Waters (a Cal alumna, B.A. '67), all "Women Taking the Lead to Save Our Planet." And in April, the City of Berkeley gave her an "Outstanding Woman of Berkeley" award. Blum took time away from chemistry after completing her doctorate to pursue the high-altitude climbing life (in which for many years she was a pioneering woman) and associated endeavors, before returning to her primary profession. For the last few years she's been back on this campus, where in her early career she helped ban a carcinogenic fire retardant from children's sleepwear. Her new research centers on the same compounds, which she has found are used extensively as retardants in the polyurethane foam inside household and industrial furniture. She acknowledges that furniture fires can be a danger, but puts them in a context of scale, as shown in a report from the Consumer Product Safety Commission. According to that report, she says, "560 Americans died in house fires that started in upholstered furniture in 2003. But by contrast, cancer killed more than 500,000."

Her favorite part of the city's award ceremony, she says, "was the speech by my Berkeley Ph.D. advisor, Nacho Tinoco, who had nominated me. I had worried that my career path disappointed him, and it was a huge happy surprise to hear him speak of my contributions to science and the world."

- Learn more about Arlene: [\*Grad Spotlight\*](#)