

Jennifer T. Chayes Biography

July 14, 2023. Patrick Charbonneau

Jennifer Tour Chayes (20 Sep 1956-) was born in New York City, USA, the daughter of Eli Tour, pharmacist, and Hedy Tour (née Nafissian), housewife. She spent her youth in nearby White Plain, New York, USA. After dropping out of high school, she completed her degree at Alpha Community School, taught by volunteers who wanted to keep people from dropping out.

Chayes attended Wesleyan (1974-1979), where she obtained a BSc in Physics and Biology. She went on to obtain a PhD in Mathematical Physics (1983) at Princeton University for a thesis entitled “The inverse problem, plaquette percolation and a generalized Potts model”, under the supervision of Elliott Lieb. She then held postdoctoral positions in the Department of Mathematics at Harvard (1983-1985) and in the Department of Physics at Cornell (1985-1987). In 1987, she joined the Department of Mathematics faculty at University of California Los Angeles as Associate Professor (with tenure) and was promoted Professor in 1990. In 1997, she became Senior Researcher and Head of the Theory Group at Microsoft Research in Redmond, Washington, USA. After a few promotions, she became Managing Director of Microsoft Research New England, which she co-founded in 2008, Microsoft Research New York City, which she founded in 2012, and Microsoft Research Montreal, which she founded in 2017. Since 2020, she is Associate Provost of the Division of Computing, Data Science, and Society and Dean of the School of Information at the University of California, Berkeley, where she is also Professor of Electrical Engineering and Computer Sciences, Mathematics, Statistics, and Information. During her time near Seattle, she was Affiliate Professor of the Department of Physics (1997-2008) and of the Department of Mathematics (1999-2008) at the University of Washington. She was a long-term visitor at Institute for Advanced Study (Sep. 1994-Apr. 1995 and Jan.-Apr. 1997), at ETH Zürich (May-July 1995), and at AT&T Research, in New Jersey (Sep.-Dec. 1996).

Chayes was trained as a mathematical physicist with a focus on the statistical mechanics of percolation. Afterwards, her interest quickly diversified to include spin glasses and other models with disorder. She later pursued problems with disorder at the interface of statistical physics and computer science, which she helped promote as a Microsoft Research manager. She is also an active promoter of diversity in science.

Chayes is notably a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (2006), the Association for Computing Machinery (2011), the American Mathematical Society (2012), and is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (2014) and the National Academy of Sciences of the U.S.A. (2019). She has received numerous awards, including a National Science Foundation Postdoctoral Research Fellowship (1984-1987); an Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Research Fellowship (1989); The John von Neumann Lecture Prize (2015) of the Society for Industrial and Applied Mathematics for “her

leadership in the research community, as well as her seminal contributions to the study of phase transitions in both mathematical physics and the theory of computing”; and the Distinguished Service Award of the Association of Computing Machinery (2020) “for her effective leadership, mentorship and dedication to diversity during her distinguished career of computer science research, teaching, and institution building”. She has also received Honorary Doctorates from Leiden University (2016) and Bard University (2021).