

For courage, innovation and a better future

The many facets of the Bertha and Carl Benz Award

She is languishing in a Saudi jail because she drove a car, because she is fighting against paternalism and for equal opportunities for women. But locking her up has not done any good. The activist Loujain al-Hathloul has captured the world's attention. And her endeavours have helped bring about significant change because since June 2018 Saudi women have been able to apply for a driver's licence and drive a car independently. The City of Mannheim is honouring the commitment and courage of this 31-year-old woman by awarding her the Bertha and Carl Benz Award. The prize ceremony, which is taking place on 20 September 2020, is being hosted by Grimme-award winner Constantin Schreiber and a speech in her honour will be given by the journalist Dunja Hayali.

What? A car prize for a women's rights campaigner? That is a question that is bound to be asked because not many people are that familiar with the Bertha and Carl Benz Award. And no, it isn't a car prize even though it is linked in a way to the automobile and not without reason. The Bertha and Carl Benz Award is not purely about how you get from A to B. It is about numerous levels of mobility: about simpler mobility, about social and more environmentally friendly mobility. And running through it always is the notion of sustainability, a key theme in the City of Mannheim's mission statement that was adopted in 2019.

So the 2019 award winner, Loujain al-Hathloul, could not be more appropriate. She stands for social mobility because it is down to her and her fellow campaigners that women in Saudi Arabia – the last country in the world to ban women from driving – are now allowed to drive cars. This new mobility gives women quite different opportunities for social advancement. Opportunities that will develop the country sustainably in the truest sense of the world.

The Bertha and Carl Benz Award, which is awarded every two years and comes with prize money of 10,000 euros, was launched in 2011 to mark the 125th anniversary of the automobile. It is the newest of the three major awards issued by the City of Mannheim. These include the Schiller Award for culture and the Konrad Duden Award for science. The idea behind the creation of the award is not that far-fetched: not only is Mannheim the birthplace of the bicycle, something that plenty of people happen to be unaware of, but it is also the birthplace of the automobile. Carl Benz tinkered on it long ago in his workshop in the city's T-squares. And even his wife Bertha Benz was heavily involved in his success. She put her entire inheritance into the development of the motorcar and was practically a pioneer of the car herself with her legendary trip to Pforzheim in 1888. Mannheim is a city of creation, a city of innovation. It goes without saying that innovative minds have a special status here and are therefore honoured accordingly.

Taking a look at previous award winners, another aspect becomes evident: the ability of this City of Squares to take a broader view and have an international outlook. While the rules of the Bertha and Carl Benz Award do not explicitly state that the winner should come from abroad, to date the choice – even if largely purely by chance – has always fallen on prize winners or organisations from outside the borders of the city and the country: the Israeli entrepreneur Shai Agassi (2011), the Spanish scientist José del R. Millán (2013), the Danish urban designer Jan Gehl (2015) and the international aid organisation World Bicycle Relief (2017).

Initially, though, Loujain al-Hathloul did not feature prominently in considerations for the 2019 winner. However, the mayor and the council soon identified the parallels between Mannheim and the prize winner. Commenting on their ultimate choice of the 31-year-old for the award, Dr. Peter

Kurz said: “Loujain al-Hathloul has led an outstanding campaign for values that are particularly important to the City of Mannheim and to its identity as a cosmopolitan city”.

Due to the current coronavirus situation, the Bertha and Carl Benz Award ceremony will be held virtually this year. Something that initially seemed challenging has ended up presenting new opportunities because the award ceremony, which will take place in the presence of just a few guests in Mannheim’s Rosengarten, can now be watched by everyone via a live stream. All over the world.