

MacArthur Foundation reveals 2012 'genius grants'

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In this Sept. 17, 2012 photo provided by the Chicago-based John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Chris Thile, 31, a mandolinist and composer who is creating a new musical aesthetic and a distinctly American canon for the mandolin through a lyrical fusion of traditional bluegrass orchestrations with a range of styles and genres, is seen in his East Village apartment in New York. Thile is among 23 recipients of this year's MacArthur Foundation "genius grants." (AP Photo/Courtesy of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Christopher Lane)

(AP)—Mandolin player and composer Chris Thile learned the hard way that when you get a call from the 312 area code this time of year, you should probably answer the phone.

Thile is among 23 recipients of this year's MacArthur Foundation "genius grants," which are given in a secrecy-shrouded process. Winners have no idea they've been nominated for the \$500,000 awards until they

get the call, and nominators must remain anonymous.

Thile ignored the incessant phone calls from the foundation at first, thinking they were election-year robocalls. Then he received an ominous message: "Don't tell anyone about this call."

His tour manager searched for the number online and told him, "It appears to be from something called the MacArthur Foundation." It was a name Thile recognized.

"I think I must have turned white," he said. "I've never felt so internally warm. My heart was racing. All of a sudden, I felt very askew physically. I was trying to catch my breath. ... I thought, 'Oh my God, did I win a MacArthur?'"

The grants, paid over five years, give recipients freedom to pursue a creative vision. Winners, who work in fields ranging from medicine and science to the arts and journalism, don't have to report how they spend the money.

Thile, who played with Nickel Creek and is now touring with Punch Brothers, said he may use the grant to fund a chamber music project for a bluegrass quintet.

Northwestern University historian Dylan C. Penningroth said he now can expand his search for court records of property owned by slaves in the pre-Civil War South.

"This grant will make it possible for me to think big, to be more ambitious about the time period I cover and the questions I'm trying to answer, like, what's the connection to the modern civil rights era?" Penningroth said.

For other winners—there have been 873 so far, including this year's recipients—the grants bring prestige, confirmation and, in some cases, moments of profound reflection about life and fate.

"It left me thinking about my childhood," said Dominican-American author Junot Diaz, who wrote the Pulitzer-winning novel "The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao."

"It would never have dawned on me to think such a thing was possible for me," Diaz said, reflecting on his early years in New Jersey "struggling with poverty, struggling with English. ... I came from a community that was about as hard-working as you can get and yet no one saw or recognized in any way our contributions or our genius. ... I have to wonder, but for circumstances, how many other kids that I came up with are more worthy of this fellowship than me?"

David Finkel, author and national enterprise editor for the Washington Post, said the grant will allow him to complete a story he began in his book, "The Good Soldiers." The nonfiction work recounted the experiences of a U.S. Army infantry battalion deployed to Baghdad as part of the 2007 surge. Finkel is now following returning soldiers and their families, "watching a lot of them sink lower and lower and try to get help and maybe not doing so well with the help that's out there."

Winning a MacArthur grant felt like an endorsement not only of his own work, he said, but also of the type of long-form journalism he practices, which is in jeopardy as newspapers respond to the digital age. Declining circulation has forced newspaper publishers to shrink the size of their print publications and their staffs. Finkel admires the experimentation under way in journalism, but added: "I'm old-fashioned. The thing I'm most moved by is a well-told, deeply reported long story."

Maurice Lim Miller saw the MacArthur nod as validation of his project,

called the Family Independence Initiative. The project, started in 2001 in Oakland, California, rewards self-sufficiency among residents of low-income neighborhoods by bringing groups of friends together and asking them to track the steps they take toward saving money, finding jobs, helping their children do well in school and other goals. Families increase their incomes and savings, start businesses and buy homes, he said.

Neither liberal nor conservative, the initiative transcends the current political debate about personal responsibility, Lim Miller said.

"Our work falls between the arguments that are being had between the right and the left," Lim Miller said. "The argument that people DON'T take personal responsibility is wrong. But the argument that they SHOULD take personal responsibility is right."

MacArthur winner Elissa Hallem is studying how parasitic worms find hosts through their sense of smell. Threadworms, attracted by carbon dioxide, can enter a person's body through the soles of the feet, for example. Hallem's work may someday prevent parasites from harming humans and improve the efficiency of good parasites that infect crop-killing insects.

"I didn't manage to say much other than, 'Wow' and 'Thank you,'" Hallem said about the "genius grant" call, which came as she was working in the microscope room at the University of California, Los Angeles. "I feel very honored that they recognized my work in this way and are making this investment in my research."

2012 MacArthur Foundation 'genius grant' winners

The following 23 fellows each will receive \$500,000 over the next five years from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation:

—Natalia Almada, 37, Mexico City. Documentary filmmaker who captures complex and nuanced views of Mexican history, politics and culture.

—Uta Barth, 54, Los Angeles, California. Conceptual photographer who explores the nature of vision and the difference between seen reality and how a camera records it.

—Claire Chase, 34, Brooklyn, New York. Arts entrepreneur who engages audiences in the appreciation of contemporary classical music and opens new avenues of artistic expression through her International Contemporary Ensemble.

—Raj Chetty, 33, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Economist at Harvard University who studies how policy decisions affect real-world behavior.

—Maria Chudnovsky, 35, New York. Mathematician at Columbia University whose work is deepening the connections between graph theory and other major branches of mathematics, such as linear programming and geometry.

—Eric Coleman, 47, Denver, Colorado. Geriatrician at University of Colorado School of Medicine who is improving health care by focusing on patient transitions from hospitals to homes and care facilities.

—Junot Díaz, 43, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Fiction writer at Massachusetts Institute of Technology who uses raw, vernacular dialogue and spare, unsentimental prose to draw readers into the various and distinct worlds that immigrants must straddle.

—David Finkel, 56, Washington, D.C. Washington Post journalist whose long-form newswriting has transformed readers' understanding of military service and sacrifice.

—Olivier Guyon, 36, Tucson, Arizona. Optical physicist and astronomer at University of Arizona who designs telescopes and other astronomical instrumentation that play a critical role in the search for Earth-like planets outside this solar system.

—Elissa Hallem, 34, Los Angeles. Neurobiologist at University of California, Los Angeles, who explores the physiology and behavioral consequences of odor detection in invertebrates and identifies interventions that may eventually reduce the scourge of parasitic infections in humans.

—An-My Le, 52, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. Photographer at Bard College who approaches the subjects of war and landscape from new perspectives to create images rich with layers of meaning.

—Sarkis Mazmanian, 39, Pasadena, California. Medical microbiologist at the California Institute of Technology who studies the role intestinal bacteria may play in a broad range of human diseases.

—Dinaw Mengestu, 34, Washington, D.C. Writer whose novels and nonfiction pieces enrich understanding of the little-explored world of the African diaspora in America.

—Maurice Lim Miller, 66, Oakland, California. Social services innovator who designs projects that reward and track self-sufficiency among residents of low-income neighborhoods in Oakland, San Francisco and Boston.

—Dylan C. Penningroth, 41, Evanston, Illinois. Historian at Northwestern University who is unearthing evidence from scattered archives to shed light on shifting concepts of property ownership and kinship among African American slaves and their descendants.

—Terry Plank, 48, New York. Geochemist at Columbia University who probes the usually invisible but remarkably powerful thermal and chemical forces deep below the Earth's crust that drive the motion of tectonic plate collisions.

—Laura Poitras, 48, New York. Documentary filmmaker revealing the consequences of military conflict abroad in documentaries that portray the lives and intimate experiences of families and communities largely inaccessible to the American media.

—Nancy Rabalais, 62, Chauvin, Louisiana. Marine ecologist at the Louisiana Universities Marine Consortium who documents the environmental and economic consequences of dead zones in the Gulf of Mexico.

—Benoit Rolland, 58, Boston. Stringed-instrument bow maker who experiments with new designs and materials to create violin, viola and cello bows that rival prized 19th century bows and meet the artistic demands of today's musicians.

—Daniel Spielman, 42, New Haven, Connecticut. Computer scientist at Yale University who connects theoretical and applied computing to resolve issues in code optimization theory with real-world implications.

—Melody Swartz, 43, Lausanne, Switzerland. Bioengineer who enhances understanding of the dynamic processes of tissue vascularization and immune responses to tumor invasion using concepts and methods from biophysics, cell culture, molecular genetics, engineering and immunology.

—Chris Thile, 31, New York. Mandolinist and composer who is creating a new musical aesthetic and a distinctly American canon for the mandolin through a lyrical fusion of traditional bluegrass orchestrations

with a range of styles and genres.

—Benjamin Warf, 54, Boston. Pediatric neurosurgeon at Children's Hospital of Boston who is revolutionizing treatment of hydrocephalus and other intra-cranial diseases in young children and advancing standards of and access to health care in both the developed and poorest regions of the world.

More information: MacArthur Foundation: www.macfound.org

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