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MacArthur Foundation Announces New Fellowship Winners

By Ian Wilhelm

The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation has named a nonprofit health worker, a poet, a paper maker, and 21 other people as new MacArthur Fellows.

The fellowships, which are commonly referred to as “genius grants,” recognize individuals from a wide range of disciplines who, according to the Chicago foundation, have demonstrated creativity and the potential to make important contributions to the world.

Twelve women and 12 men were selected this year, ranging in age from 32 to 69. Each one will receive \$500,000 over five years with no strings attached. Fifteen of the fellows work at academic institutions or other nonprofit organizations. They include Jill Seaman and Rebecca Onie, who have both sought to improve the health of impoverished people.

Ms. Seaman, a 57-year-old doctor, has worked in Sudan helping to prevent the spread of diseases among the Nuer tribe in the country’s Upper Nile province. She began her work in the region in 1989 with Doctors Without Borders. When the aid group left Sudan due to security concerns in the late 1990s, Ms. Seaman stayed and established a medical charity to continue her health work.

On the domestic front, Ms. Onie, 32, co-founded Project Health, a Boston group that recruits and trains college volunteers to assist hospitals and medical clinics.

As an undergraduate student at Harvard University in the late 1990s, Ms. Onie volunteered for the housing unit of a legal-services group, where she saw that the problems of its impoverished clients were often tied to health issues.

“Families would come in and they were about to be evicted because they hadn’t paid their rent,” she says. “They hadn’t paid their rent because they were paying for their medication.”

Ms. Onie co-founded Project Health to ameliorate some of those nonmedical problems that lead to bad health conditions.

The group’s primary program is operating Family Health Desks at 10 hospitals in six cities. Doctors can write “prescriptions” for food, housing assistance, or other aid for patients. At the desks, college students connect the patients with various government and nonprofit social services.

With MacArthur’s monetary windfall, Ms. Onie says she will donate a portion of it to her group, which is about to start a \$10-million fund-raising campaign. But while she is thankful for the

money, she emphasizes that the MacArthur fellowship is more valuable for the chance it provides her to speak out on pressing issues.

“It’s the most profound opportunity to be able to have a forum to talk about our work,” she says, “and the role it can play in the unfolding health-care discussion in this country.”

Following are the 2009 fellows, along with a summary of their accomplishments as provided by the MacArthur Foundation:

- **Lynsey Addario**, 35, photojournalist, in Istanbul. She is creating a visual record of the most pressing conflicts and humanitarian crises of the 21st century.
- **Maneesh Agrawala**, 37, associate professor of electrical engineering and computer science, University of California at Berkeley. He is designing visual interfaces that enhance users’ ability to synthesize and comprehend large quantities of complex, digital information.
- **Timothy Barrett**, 59, research scientist, University of Iowa, in Iowa City. He is reinvigorating the art of hand papermaking and leading the preservation of traditional Western and Japanese techniques and practices.
- **Mark Bradford**, 47, mixed-media artist, in Los Angeles. He is incorporating ephemera from urban environments into richly textured, abstract compositions that evoke a multitude of metaphors.
- **Edwidge Danticat**, 40, novelist, in Miami. She is chronicling the power of human resistance and endurance through moving and insightful depictions of the Haitian immigrant experience.
- **Rackstraw Downes**, 69, painter, in New York. He is rendering minutely detailed landscapes of unexpected vistas that reconsider the interaction between the built and natural worlds.
- **Esther Duflo**, 36, professor of poverty alleviation and development economics, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in Cambridge. She is analyzing the forces perpetuating cycles of poverty in South Asia and Africa.
- **Deborah Eisenberg**, 63, short-story writer, in New York. She is crafting portraits of contemporary American life in tales of striking precision, fluency, and moral depth.
- **Lin He**, 35, assistant professor of cell and developmental biology, University of California at Berkeley. She is advancing our understanding of the role of microRNA’s in the development of cancer and laying the groundwork for future cancer treatments.

- **Peter Huybers**, 35, assistant professor of climate, Harvard University, in Cambridge. He is mining a wealth of often-conflicting experimental observations to develop compelling theories that explain global climate change over time.
- **James Longley**, 37, filmmaker, Daylight Factory, in Seattle. He is deepening our understanding of the conflicts in the Middle East through intimate portraits of communities living under extremely challenging conditions.
- **L. Mahadevan**, 44, professor of applied mathematics, Harvard University, in Cambridge. He is investigating principles underlying the behavior of complex systems to address such accessible but vexing questions as how flags flutter, how skin wrinkles, and how Venus flytraps snap closed.
- **Heather McHugh**, 61, professor of English, University of Washington, in Seattle. She is a poet composing richly layered verse that unabashedly embraces such wordplay as puns, rhymes, and syntactical twists to explore the human condition.
- **Jerry Mitchell**, 50, investigative reporter, Clarion-Ledger, in Jackson, Miss. He is ensuring that unsolved murders from the civil-rights era are finally prosecuted by uncovering largely unknown details of decades-old stories of thwarted justice.
- **Richard Prum**, 48, professor of ornithology, Yale University, in New Haven, Conn. He is drawing from developmental biology, optical physics, and paleontology to address central questions about avian development, evolution, and behavior.
- **John A. Rogers**, 42, professor of materials science and engineering, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He is inventing flexible electronic devices that lay the foundation for a revolution in manufacture of industrial, consumer, and biocompatible technologies.
- **Elyn Saks**, 53, professor of law, psychology, and psychiatry and the behavioral sciences, University of Southern California, in Los Angeles. She is expanding the options for those suffering from severe mental illness through scholarship, practice, and policy informed by a life story that adds uncommon depth and insight.
- **Beth Shapiro**, 33, assistant professor of biology, Pennsylvania State University, in University Park. She is using molecular phylogenetics and biostatistics to reconstruct the influences on population dynamics of extinct or severely challenged species.
- **Daniel Sigman**, 40, professor of geological and geophysical sciences, at Princeton University, in N.J. He is unraveling the interrelated physical, chemical, geological, and biological forces that have shaped the oceans' fertility and the earth's climate over the past two million years.
- **Mary Tinetti**, 58, professor of medicine and epidemiology and public health, Yale University School of Medicine, in New Haven, Conn. She is challenging prevailing

notions of falls as unavoidable accidents associated with advanced age and identifying risk factors that contribute to morbidity due to falls.

- **Camille Utterback**, 39, digital artist, in San Francisco. She is redefining how viewers experience and interact with art through pictorial compositions that are activated by human presence and movement.
- **Theodore Zoli**, 43, bridge engineer, HNTB Corporation, in New York. He is making major technological advances to protect transportation infrastructure in the event of natural disasters or crises people create.