

Four From Mass. Win 2009 ‘Genius’ Awards

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BOSTON — Imagine being contacted unexpectedly and told that you are going to be given \$500,000 — with no strings attached — to spend in whatever way you wish.

That’s the enviable position that 24 people nationwide, including four from the Boston area, find themselves in today.

They are this year’s winners of the MacArthur Fellowships, also known as “genius awards,” which grant a half-million dollars apiece to individuals who show exceptional creativity in their work — and the promise of even more creativity in their futures.

Among this year’s winners are:

Esther Duflo, 36, an MIT economist whose research explores the “social and economic forces perpetuating the cycle of poverty for the poorest peoples in South Asia and Africa,” according to the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, which funds the awards.

Peter Huybers, 35, an assistant professor of earth and planetary sciences at Harvard University who has developed “several influential theories that explain global climate change on various time scales,” according to the foundation.

L. Mahadevan, 44, a professor of applied mathematics at Harvard University who explores, in the foundation’s words, “seemingly simple, but vexing, questions across the physical and biological sciences — how cloth folds when draped, how skin wrinkles, how flags flutter, how Venus flytraps snap closed.”



Rebecca Onie, 32, a “public health entrepreneur” who is the co-founder and chief executive of Project Health, a Boston nonprofit that helps low-income people get access to health care.

A Brookline resident, Onie created Project Health 13 years ago during her second year at Harvard University and the organization now operates at pediatric clinics in six cities — Boston, Providence, New York, Baltimore, Chicago, and Washington D.C.

The program lets doctors write “prescriptions” for food, housing, child care and other basic resources that many impoverished patients don’t have, contributing to their poor health.

In an interview with WBUR, Onie said that when a foundation representative called to inform her that she was among this year’s winners, he reminded her that the half-million dollar award comes with no restrictions on how the money is spent.

“Literally, the man said to me on the phone, ‘This will be the first and last conversation we have. You will never hear from us again,’ ” Onie recalled. “He said, ‘Our intention is for you to be able to use these resources in whatever ways will enable you to realize your creative vision,’ which is, as you can imagine, extraordinary in my work.”

Onie says she hopes to use part of the money to expand Project Health to more cities.

The MacArthur grants are paid in quarterly installments over five years, and they are designed to provide seed money for intellectual, social and artistic endeavors. Individuals cannot apply for the award; they must be nominated.

There are no limits on a prospective winner’s age or area of activity. This year’s recipients, for example, include a photojournalist, paper maker, short story writer, molecular biologist, investigative reporter, mental health lawyer, ornithologist, bridge engineer, and two poets.