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STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

What Works

Creative Space

**How MacArthur's no-strings-attached "genius"
grants uncover exceptional people**

By Andrea Orr

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GRANTMAKING

Creative Space

How MacArthur's no-strings-attached "genius" grants uncover exceptional people *by Andrea Orr*

One morning last September, Tommie Lindsey awoke to a phone call that was so shocking he thought he was still dreaming. On the other line, a stranger from Chicago said he'd been awarded \$500,000 for the creativity and promise he'd shown during 15 years as a public school speech and debate teacher in a working-class suburb of San Francisco.

Then, as quickly as this mysterious benefactor had appeared, he was gone. He told Lindsey that he'd never hear from him again. He was free to use the money however he wished.

It took a minute to understand that this was not a marketing gimmick. When it finally sank in, Lindsey rubbed his eyes and thought about what he could do with a half million dollars. His daughter, a college senior, had student loans to repay. His son, still in high school, wanted a car. And Lindsey was a little tired. He thought he might indulge on a vacation.

All pretty pedestrian concerns for the recipient of a prestigious grant, yet all things that would be just fine with the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. With the broad mission of "promoting lasting improvement in the human condition," MacArthur each year earmarks a small portion of its \$4 billion endowment for its no-strings-attached MacArthur Fellowships, awarded to people in all sorts of fields from architecture to fiction, philosophy of science, international security, and psychology. Fellows are selected for their potential to do creative work in the future.

Recognizing Future Creative Work

That's right, the future. Unlike the Pulitzers, the Nobels, and so many other awards that recognize the brilliance of past achievements – and come with enough prize money to allow for an extended vacation or complete retirement – the MacArthur grants are designed to encourage future work. The curious part is that, for such a large investment made with such weighty expectations, MacArthur will never quibble about how a recipient uses the cash. A car for your teenaged son? Sounds good. A two-week Hawaiian vacation? Think about staying three.

"It doesn't bother us," says Daniel Socolow, who, as director of the MacArthur Fellows Program, has the coveted job of phoning 20 or so grant winners each year and telling them they have just become a half million dollars richer. "We

believe that creative people need peace of mind, and space, and money helps provide both those things," Socolow explains.

How successful has this unrestricted giving been? The list of past MacArthur Fellows pretty much sums it up. To name just a few, there's poet Joseph Brodsky, novelist William Kennedy, composer Gunther Schuller, scientist Stephen Jay Gould, and Children's Defense Fund founder Marion Wright Edelman. Many recipients, like poet Mark Strand and *New York Times* journalist Tina Rosenberg, went on to win Pulitzers. This year alone, two of the Nobel Prize winners for physics, David Gross and Frank Wilczek, were past MacArthur Fellows.

Nonprofit Leaders, Jugglers, Physicists, and More

The MacArthur Foundation, however, prefers not to name drop Nobel and Pulitzer winners. Unlike the Pulitzer Prizes, which are limited to the art of the written word, or even the Nobel, which recognizes work in a somewhat narrow group of artistic and scientific fields, MacArthur refuses to confine itself in such a way. While it has given the fellowship to 24 physicists and 31 biologists since it began awarding grants in 1987, it has also searched for leaders in more obscure disciplines. Over the years it has recognized four people for their work in zoology, and one, Jane Richardson, for her work in crystallography, which focuses on the structure and function of different molecules. One year, MacArthur gave the grant to a juggler, Michael Moschen. Because it has recognized people from such diverse disciplines, its grants are often referred to as "genius grants" in the media and academia.

"I frankly think that term is too limiting," says Socolow. "It seems to imply you've got to have a certain list of qualities."

Talent Scouts Do the Groundwork

To the contrary, there are no specific prerequisites for becoming a MacArthur Fellow, although the foundation does have an exhaustive and secretive review process designed to uncover people who are making groundbreaking contributions. Hundreds of talent scouts are retained to identify good candidates and then interview all sorts of friends and associates to develop a sense of whether the grant money would be put to good use. Although many people dream of receiving



such a grant and maneuver to get their name in front of MacArthur, all such submissions are thrown away. If the fellowship program has changed at all during the past 21 years, it has been to recognize fewer prominent academics and more people like Tommie Lindsey, unknown outside their immediate communities.

Making a no-strings-attached donation would seem counterintuitive to anyone who thinks productivity requires structure, deadlines, and perhaps a little pressure or accountability. But when MacArthur is pressed to explain its process, it only repeats that it goes out of its way to remove all pressure on grant recipients. It does not hold an awards ceremony in the beginning. It makes no progress reports over the five-year duration of the fellowship. The only contact it has with its fellows is once a year, when it sends out their annual \$100,000 installment.

In a soothing voice that reveals his confidence that the money invested is always money well spent, Socolow describes a system that is simple yet rigorous, and has worked so well from its inception that it never had to be tweaked. “There are a lot of people who come to me each year and want to copy it,” he says. “When they understand it is not just a gimmick but a rigorous program, they back away. It is hard to do it well.”

Socolow is not just being cagey. He really has no list of qualities for the grant winners, and although he does know the names of all the talent scouts enlisted to search for candidates, he plans to take that list to the grave. In fact, the only MacArthur talent scout to ever be publicly identified was a man whose proud family spilled the secret in his obituary. All the talent scouts, Socolow says, are accomplished individuals who might qualify for a grant on their own. But by insisting on confidentiality, it helps to keep egos out of the process, and also minimizes the number of self-nominations that come in. Once the fellows are selected, MacArthur does provide their names to the press, because it believes public recognition is often critical in helping creative people further their pursuits.

Secret but Extensive Research on Candidates

Years ago, a creative individual who had received an encouraging amount of recognition was nominated for the grant by an acquaintance who could not help but breach protocol and share his secret. “Right away, I started fantasizing about what it would be like,” he recalls. “Your mind starts to run, because just by being nominated, it recognizes your secret highest

view of yourself.” This individual, however, never actually won the prize.

What he did not grasp at the time was that being nominated is just the first step in an extensive evaluation to determine who might be trusted with so much money. This is the unquantifiable part of the process: the secret sauce that MacArthur has clearly honed to an art, even when other people want to believe it’s a science. “We write to people all around a nominee, and we listen to what they say,” explains Socolow. “We read everything about them.”

And when the research is thorough enough, the best candidates just fall away from the crowd.

Tommie Lindsey is a good example. By all accounts, he was a talented teacher: His debate team had consistently won state and national championships, and although fewer than half the students in the school where he taught went on to college, close to 100 percent of Lindsey’s students were collegebound. Many quit sports teams to commit themselves to his speech and debate team; a few were so good they were selected, over famous talking heads, to offer commentary on the presidential

debates for public radio.

The more the MacArthur Foundation learned about Lindsey, the more it came to understand he was not just an outstanding teacher, he was one of a kind. When students were too poor to afford travel expenses to out-of-town debates, Lindsey would foot the bill. When students lacked the grades to get into college, he arranged for them to do extra work to raise their GPAs. Sometimes, when students got rejected from college, he would insist on an appeal. One former student, Terry Flenbaugh, was rejected three times by the University of California, Los Angeles when Lindsey told him to appeal the decision one more time. Today, Flenbaugh is finishing his degree at UCLA, and planning to pursue a Ph.D., all thanks to one teacher, who is exceptional by any standards.

“I think Mr. Lindsey was the only person who thought I had a shot through the whole process,” recalls Flenbaugh. “He saw potential for leadership and excellence.”

Now, Lindsey is being recognized for his own potential. “He can begin to dream,” says Socolow. “It’s magical.” □

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