Life after winning a MacArthur

Maryland's fellows discuss how the 'genius' grant changed their lives

By Mary Carole McCauley, The Baltimore Sun

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When conductor Marin Alsop won a MacArthur "genius" award, she was in the throes of the most serious crisis of her career. And the very public vote of confidence that the award provided gave her the boost she needed to face down her naysayers.

For author and historian Taylor Branch, the financial windfall meant he no longer had to work quite as many part-time jobs to support his family during the 24 years it took him to complete his trilogy about the life of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

The prize empowered the biologist and environmental health scientist Ellen Silbergeld to take a career risk and embark on a completely new line of research. When she began looking in 1999 at how antibiotics fed to farm animals can affect human health, that field was on the fringes of the mainstream scientific community.

"The MacArthur Award," Silbergeld says, "gave me the temerity to go forward after being repeatedly told that I was nuts."

The 2010 fellows were just named Tuesday, so they can have no idea how winning a MacArthur will change their lives. The current group of 23 includes two with Baltimore ties: David Simon, a television writer and producer and former reporter for The Baltimore Sun, and Elizabeth Turk, a sculptor who graduated from the Maryland Institute College of Art with a master's degree in 1994.

The experiences of several past Maryland winners might serve as a kind of road map, although the particular set of elevations and troughs that each fellow encounters will vary with each individual.

Some winners say without a hint of apology that the primary benefit was the sudden influx of cold hard cash. The grants (currently $500,000) are spread over five years, but come with no strings attached — though sadly, none of the fellows admitted using their winnings to buy a diamond tiara or to finance a spree at the Vegas gambling tables.

"I'd have to say that 99 percent of the value of the MacArthur to me was the money," Branch says.

He won his MacArthur in 1991, after the first book of his trilogy, "Parting the Waters" was published. At the
time, he was the father of two young children.

"My first book took me six years to write, and no publisher will give you an advance that will cover six years of living expenses," he says.

"I had to finance all my research and travel expenses from my advance. I was always working part-time jobs and constantly trying to get my publisher to give me more money. The second book took 10 years to write and the third book took me eight, so winning the MacArthur was a godsend. I still had to scramble for money, but I wasn't scrambling nearly as bad."

Similarly, Liz Lerman, a choreographer based in Takoma Park and founder of Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, won her MacArthur in 2002. She used much of her fellowship money to create a retirement account for herself and her husband and to set up a college fund for their daughter. She reasoned that once the worry of financial destitution had been removed, it would free her up to direct all her energies toward creating dances around such abstract themes as immigration and the human genome project.

Validation

Some fellows say the change is mostly internal. It's as though they suddenly had been stamped with the right amount of postage. Previously, their ideas might have fallen to the bottom of the mail bin. Now, they get express delivery.

"Before I won the MacArthur in 2008, what we do, which is study patient safety in hospitals, was never really respected as a science," says Peter Pronovost, a physician for the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

"In medicine, finding new genes or developing new drugs gets 100 times more money than what we do. After I won the MacArthur, I testified several times before Congress. The award gave significant credibility to the field of patient safety research. It helped influence public policy."

Now, a pilot program that Pronovost started in Michigan's intensive-care hospital units is being extended to all 50 states and several foreign countries. The project is being funded, Pronovost says, mostly with federal grants, but also with some of his MacArthur money.

And for Alsop, her MacArthur couldn't have been better timed. Her fellowship was announced in September 2005 — just after she had been named the new music director of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra.

Her appointment was controversial. Many of the musicians were angry at decisions by the orchestra's management that resulted in the departure of Yuri Temirkanov, who had led the symphony to new artistic heights. The musicians requested that the search process be extended, and although they never directly criticized either Alsop or her conducting, the move was widely perceived as a slap in her face.

"It was an extremely critical time for me, a time that was a little bit stressful," Alsop says with intentional understatement. "Daniel Socolow [director of the MacArthur Fellows Program] called me in Denver at 8 a.m. He said, 'We've been looking at you for a while, and we thought this would be a good time to let the world know what we think of you.' That was very moving to me."

Astrophysicist Adam Riess found that the fellowship allowed him to sidestep years of cumbersome grant procedures. When he wanted to try putting an experimental new filter atop a mountaintop telescope, he could just reach into his pocket, pull out $25,000, and buy one.

"I had an idea about a new, exotic kind of filter that we could put on a telescope on Mauna Kea," says Riess, a professor at Hopkins who won his MacArthur in 2008 and who conducts experiments that try to measure
"dark energy."

"It's hard to get a research grant for something unusual and outside the box," he says. "The MacArthur allowed me to take the risk. The filter is working very well. We're very happy with the results so far, and we will be writing a paper soon on what we've learned."

**Seed money**

Along a similar vein, Alsop created a program called OrchKids that is dedicated to bringing classical music instruction into the schools. Though Alsop fervently believes in the importance of arts education, it can take decades, or longer, to demonstrate the positive effect on even one life.

The $100,000 seed money for the program came from Alsop's MacArthur winnings, though other donors have since stepped up and contributed to the program.

"My parents taught me that you have to lead the way and put your money where your mouth is," Alsop says. "You have to make a personal sacrifice before you can ask other people to make one."

Silbergeld, the Hopkins professor studying antibiotic-laced animal feed, also has created an educational fund of sorts from her MacArthur money and other prizes she has won over the years.

Her biology students can draw on the fund, which currently consists of $120,000, to finance their own scientific research — and it is money they would be hard-pressed to obtain from other sources.

"In science, we're generally pretty conservative," says Silbergeld, who received her award in 1993. "We tend to want to tread in footsteps that have been trod in before, like a snail extending our antennae out just a little bit further.

"Winning the MacArthur freed me up materially and mentally. I very much spread my wings, and I want to instill that same sense of adventure in my students. In the future, I hope that's the spirit that the MacArthur continues to be about."

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