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25 Receive \$500,000 'Genius' Fellowships

By [PATRICIA COHEN](#)

A sculptor who transforms straws, paper clips and Scotch tape into dazzling forms; an urban farmer who delivers healthy food to poor city dwellers; and an astronomer who looks toward the edge of the universe are among the 25 recipients of the \$500,000 "genius awards" to be announced on Tuesday by the John D. and Catherine T. [MacArthur Foundation](#).

Candidates in every conceivable field are eligible, though the largest cluster of awards this year went to scientists (13), with those in the arts (8) a close second. As always, there are a few idiosyncratic careers in the mix, including that of an engineer and architectural historian who studies and preserves ancient bridges and other structures.

The foundation's president, Jonathan F. Fanton, said the description that best characterizes this year's class of winners was "people working on the very edge of discovery and people at the edge of a new synthesis."

The recipients, who must be citizens or residents of the United States, join 756 who have been named fellows since 1981. Each gets \$100,000 a year for five years, with no strings attached. Calling the recipients is "the best hour of the year," Mr. Fanton said.

Most of the winners, who are singled out for their creativity and their potential for making important future contributions, are familiar primarily to experts in their own fields, although a few in the arts have reached larger audiences: for example, [Alex Ross](#), 40, a music critic for [The New Yorker](#) and the author of a cultural history of 20th-century music, "The Rest Is Noise"; [Tara Donovan](#), 38, who creates large installations out of everyday objects, as in "Haze," a 2003 work in which she stacked more than two million clear plastic drinking straws against a 42-foot-long wall; and [Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie](#), 31, an award-winning Nigerian writer whose most recent novel, "Half of a Yellow Sun," details the horrors following the Biafran civil war. Ms. Adichie was celebrating her birthday and taking a bath

when the phone call came. "I was thrilled and grateful," she wrote in an e-mail message from Lagos. "I like to say that America is like my distant uncle who doesn't remember my name but occasionally gives me pocket money. That phone call filled me with an enormous affection for my uncle!"

Did Ms. Donovan think the call might be a prank? "Of course not," she replied. She plans to use the prize to "make art, pay taxes."

Each year the members of a fresh team of nominators are asked to select those from within their own fields who they believe are especially deserving of the honor. Then a separate selection committee whose members are drawn from many fields makes the awards.

New York City is the home of many of the chosen artists and scientists, including [Miguel Zenón](#), 31, a saxophonist and composer whose combination of Afro-Caribbean and Latin American music is, in the foundation's words, "creating an entirely new jazz language for the 21st century"; [Jennifer Tipton](#), 71, a stage-lighting designer for dance, theater and opera; and [Leila Josefowicz](#), 30, a violinist.

Other winners in the arts include Walter Kitundu, 35, an instrument maker and composer who combines turntables and string instruments to create phonoharps; and Mary A. Jackson, 63, a Gullah descendant in coastal South Carolina who weaves sweet grass into colorful sculptural forms.

As for the scientists, some are devoted to patient care: [Diane E. Meier](#), 56, is a geriatrician who is improving treatment for critically ill patients; Wafaa El-Sadr, 58, is an infectious-disease specialist developing ways to treat AIDS and tuberculosis more effectively among the world's most disadvantaged populations; Regina M. Benjamin, 51, is a rural family physician in Bayou La Batre, Ala., a medically underserved region; and Peter J. Pronovost, 43, is a critical-care physician who is creating new clinical practices to reduce the risk of fatal medical errors and infections in hospitals.

"The work I do is often the poor stepchild of biomedical research," Mr. Pronovost said. "We spend a penny on patient-safety research for every dollar we spend on basic and clinical research." Yet without ensuring a patient's safety, "all the other science doesn't do much good to protect health," he added. He would like to use his award to help develop patient checklists to tap into the critical medical information that is available but not being used.

Biological researchers include Sally Temple, a neuroscientist; Susan Mango, a developmental biologist; and Rachel Wilson, an experimental neurobiologist. Kirsten Bombly is an evolutionary plant geneticist who looks at how new species originate.

Among the physicists are Marin Soljacic, whose specialty is optics; Alexei Kitaev, who explores quantum physics and quantum computing; and Andrea Ghez, an astrophysicist developing telescopes that could improve the understanding of black holes.

[Adam Riess](#), also an astrophysicist, is one of the discoverers of dark energy, which may be the reason for the accelerating cosmic expansion. One possible use for the money, Dr. Riess said, would be a special set of filters he has been working on, "like 3-D glasses for finding exploding stars called supernovae."

John A. Ochsendorf is the engineer and architectural historian who uses old technologies that go back to the Incas to improve today's buildings. Will Allen is an urban farmer in Milwaukee, who founded the nonprofit group Growing Power.

Other winners include Stephen D. Houston, an anthropologist specializing in Maya culture; Nancy G. Siraisi, an historian of medicine focusing on the Renaissance; and David R. Montgomery, a geomorphologist, who is studying the earth's changing landscape.

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