

The Boston Globe

Area researchers win MacArthur ‘genius’ grants

By Kathleen Burge, Globe Staff
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The phone rang in Matthew Desmond’s Harvard office a few weeks ago.

“Are you able to have a confidential conversation?” the caller asked.

“Who’s this?” replied Desmond, a 35-year-old sociologist.

It was someone from the MacArthur Foundation, calling to tell him the organization was awarding him \$625,000 over the next five years.

“I immediately didn’t think it was real,” he said. “Then someone reads you what they wrote about you.”

Desmond, who spent months living in a mobile home park and a rooming house in Milwaukee to study eviction, is one of 24 fellows, including several in New England, announced Tuesday by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The foundation also chose Beth Stevens, an assistant professor of neurology at Boston Children’s Hospital and Harvard Medical School; Heidi Williams, an MIT economist, and Ellen Bryant Voigt, a poet in Cabot, Vt.

Another fellow, Gary Cohen, lives in Boston, although the company he co-founded, Health Care Without Harm, is based in Virginia. Cohen is an environmental health advocate who has worked with health care providers to reduce environmental pollution. In the 1990s, he and his company, together with Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, led a movement to eliminate mercury in health care.

Cohen and Health Care Without Harm also helped close more than 4,500 polluting medical waste incinerators across the country, and more around the world.

Recipients of the prestigious award, often called “MacArthur geniuses,” receive \$625,000 paid in equal quarterly installments over the five years.

Fellows do not apply. Rather, the foundation invites nominators to recommend potential fellows who show “extraordinary originality and dedication in their creative pursuits.”

The grants are especially prized because the money comes without any restrictions. The foundation says it looks for people with a “marked capacity for self-direction.”

Fellows are sworn to secrecy for several weeks, until the MacArthur Foundation makes its annual announcement of recipients.

Each fellow is allowed to tell one person. Desmond told his wife. They celebrated with lunch at All Star Sandwich Bar in Cambridge's Inman Square, followed by dessert at Christina's Homemade Ice Cream.

Desmond was a doctoral student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison when he began studying eviction in Milwaukee.

He wanted to look at poverty in a city that was less familiar to Americans.

First, he lived in a mobile home park for four months. Then he moved to the city's north side, the city's poorest neighborhood, and lived in a rooming house for nine months.

"Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City," a book based on that time, as well as data gathered from interviews in more than 1,000 households, is scheduled for publication in March.

Now Desmond is interested in looking at housing and poverty on a global level. The MacArthur grant — which left him feeling both gratitude as well as a sense of responsibility to use it well — will help with that work.

"Lagos, Delhi, London, New York — what is it like to be working for low wages in one of these cities and giving most of your wages to . . . rent?"

Heidi Williams was just about to leave her office to pick up her infant son at day care — she is still technically on parental leave — when her phone rang. "Are you sitting down?" the caller asked.

Williams, 34, was so startled she could barely speak. "I'm very early in my career and I'm just getting started in the work I want to do," she said. "It's quite overwhelming to hear this news and to get that vote of support."

Williams studies technological change in health care markets. Recently, she and some colleagues looked at cancer drugs, studying whether private firms invest too little in long-term research.

Williams and her colleagues found that because drugs to prevent cancer or treat early-stage disease require longer clinical trials — and take longer to bring to market — they cost more to develop than drugs for more advanced diseases. Companies have less financial incentive to produce those drugs.

Their paper suggested ways — allowing shorter clinical trials, for example — to improve public policy.

Beth Stevens, another local 2015 MacArthur fellow, studies the role of microglial cells in the brain — cells previously thought to act mainly as the brain's immune defense.

Her research has brought new understanding to the role of these cells, and suggests that some diseases, such as Huntington's disease or schizophrenia, may be the result of their impaired functioning.

"Stevens is redefining our understanding of how the wiring in the brain occurs and changes in early life and shedding new light on how the nervous and immune systems interact in the brain, both in

health and disease,” the MacArthur Foundation wrote.

Stevens said the fellowship will allow her to spend less time writing grant applications and more time following her creative instincts.

Ta-Nehisi Coates, a journalist and national correspondent for The Atlantic, was also chosen as a fellow this year. Coates’s 2015 book, “Between the World and Me,” described the experience of being a black man in this country in a letter to his 15-year-old son.

Coates was a Martin Luther King Jr. visiting scholar at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2012.

Playwright Lin-Manuel Miranda, whose musical, “Hamilton,” is earning raves on Broadway, also was named a 2015 fellow. “In the Heights,” which he began writing while he was in college, won the 2008 Tony Award for best musical.

Other fellows include Kartik Chandran, a Columbia University environmental engineer who transforms waste water into fertilizers and energy sources; Mimi Lien, a New York set designer; and Basil Twist, a puppetry artist and director.

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