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2019 MacArthur Genius Fellow sujatha baliga breaks “every good Asian girl rule” in opening up about childhood sexual abuse

posted by Irene Chang



MacArthur Genius Fellow sujatha baliga won a \$625,000 genius grant over five years from the MacArthur Foundation. MacArthur Foundation photo

By Irene Chang, AsAmNews Intern

sujatha baliga may be a 2019 [MacArthur Genius](#) Fellow, but she stays grounded by spelling her name in lowercase.

baliga works with [Impact Justice](#) in Oakland, CA as the director of the Restorative Justice Project, an initiative that centers around providing alternatives for youth in the criminal justice system.

baliga's work revolves around [restorative justice](#), which encourages "constructive, rather than punitive or retributive, responses to wrongdoing." Restorative justice heals everyone involved — including the crime survivor, the surrounding community, and those who have caused harm — and brings them together to discuss a plan to make amends.

The MacArthur Foundation awarded her a \$625,000 five year Genius Grant which she plans to use to spread her message of restorative justice.

"The role of a restorative justice facilitator is to create spaces in which people can have necessary conversations for the well-being of their relationship, including to address conflict and harm," baliga told *AsAmNews*. "The most important thing is to hold with equal partiality everyone impacted by what's happening."

Prior to moving to California, baliga had been a former [victim advocate and public defender](#) in New York and New Mexico. baliga's inspiration for restorative justice came from the Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (RJOY), an organization that she said factors the Oakland community into its justice practices.

"They think about doing things Oakland style," baliga said. "And I think that's a really important thing to do, to center the community in which you're working, in thinking about how restorative justice should flourish."



sujatha baliga. MacArthur Foundation photo

Just before earning her J.D. at the University of Pennsylvania, baliga lived in India and spent time with a community of Tibetan refugees. She learned about the Tibetan system of justice prior to Chinese occupation, a system that focused on healing for all involved, rather than forming sides and pitting people against each other.

"I really started to see that there could be justice systems that didn't rely on the binary thinking of putting people in different camps and having them duel it out," she said.

baliga had gone into law school thinking she would primarily be a victim advocate and prosecutor. But after observing how the current justice system works in "a notion of sides, of 'us versus them,'" she found that the Tibetan justice system especially

appealed to her.

baliga also attributes her dedication to alternative justice methods to her own background. Restorative justice is the perfect intersection between her cultural identity as an Indian American and a Buddhist, and her professional practices of being an attorney.

“I’ve literally broken every ‘Asian girl rule,’” she laughed, referring to how she didn’t stick to the expectation of working in a law firm, or being silent about her sexual abuse to make herself “marriageable on the Indian marriage market.”

“I didn’t follow any of those rules that were externally imposed,” she added. “It’s the ‘good Asian girl’ rules that I broke, but not what it means to be deeply connected to the things that are most important about Asian culture.”



sujatha baliga. MacArthur Foundation photo

If anything, baliga’s Asian identity drove her into this direction. Her Buddhist practice allowed her to think of justice in alternate ways, and her focus on healing entire families and communities rather than single individuals hails from the idea of a collectivist culture within Asian countries.

She is also outspoken about growing up in an abusive home and being a survivor of childhood sexual abuse from her father, and speaks publicly about her experiences on forgiveness.

“It is really, really important to me that my story becomes more publicly accessible to so many survivors who live with secrecy and shame and silence,” she said.

Part of her quest in spreading restorative justice practices is to allow everyone affected in a crime, including the perpetrator, to participate in a rehabilitating process. baliga needed a deeper level of healing for the entire family, one that current justice systems couldn’t provide.

“I didn’t ever see my father as the enemy,” she said. “I wanted us all to heal, and the systems that were in theory designed to protect me — like the criminal legal system and child protective services — weren’t designed in any way to attend to all of us simultaneously.”

baliga and her team have helped jurisdictions across the nation create youth diversion programs across the nation, which allow juveniles to actively work with their victims and communities and remain accountable for the harm they’ve caused. These [programs provide alternatives](#) to the punishment of youth detention centers and zero-tolerance school discipline policies.

“That’s essentially what the restorative justice process looks like,” baliga said. “It’s people who are being supported to be directly accountable to their crime survivors and self-identify needs — and we do that through dialogue.”

Currently, baliga said that she’s focusing on restorative justice methods for partner and sexual violence, and how to apply these practices in a safe and effective way to heal affected families.

Winning the MacArthur Genius award and title has not only freed baliga financially to pursue her research in furthering restorative justice, but has also lifted her up as a public Asian American survivor of child sexual abuse.

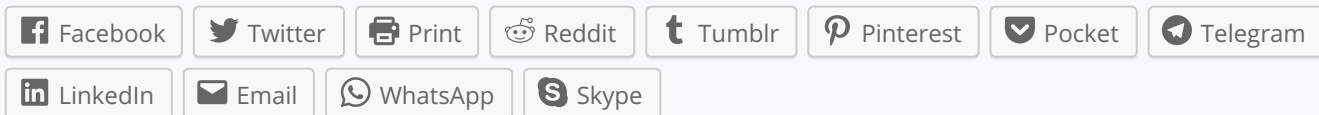
“If my receiving this award helps people know that not only can you transcend unthinkable harms, like child sexual abuse, but that you can go on to flourish and to turn what’s happened to you into something that can be a benefit to others and to live a rewarding life; like that is just such a blessing,” she said.

sujatha baliga, Attorney and Restorative Justice Practitioner | 2019 ...



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