

Oakland attorney and landscape architect named MacArthur ‘genius’ fellows

The Bay Area recipients of the so-called MacArthur “genius grants” help find alternatives to mass incarceration and turn neglected urban spaces into parks and gardens



Sujatha Baliga, a 2019 MacArthur fellow, is an attorney and director of the Restorative Justice Project. (John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation)

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An attorney who promotes forgiveness over punishment in criminal justice, and a landscape architect who transforms neglected urban spaces into places of beauty and community have been named 2019 MacArthur Foundation fellows.



Walter Hood, a 2019 MacArthur Foundation Fellow, has his Hood Design Studio in Oakland and is a professor at UC-Berkeley's College of Environmental Design (John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation)

The Bay Area recipients of the so-called MacArthur "genius grants" are Sujatha Baliga, director of the Restorative Justice Project in Oakland, and Walter Hood, a landscape and public artist who has a private studio in Oakland and who is a professor at the UC Berkeley College of Environmental Design.

This year, 26 people received the awards (full list here) that are intended to encourage people "of outstanding talent to pursue their own creative, intellectual and professional inclinations," the foundation says. Recipients include writers, scientists, artists, teachers and entrepreneurs, and they receive stipends of \$625,000, paid out over five years.

Baliga, 48, is a former public defender whose Restorative Justice Project helps develop programs across the country that promote alternatives to incarceration and other punishments for young people accused of crimes. In such programs, the offender, victim and others affected by a crime typically meet and, with the help of facilitators, come up with ways for the offender to take responsibility, make amends and turn his life around.

"The current criminal legal system often doesn't meet anyone's needs," said Baliga in an interview with this news organization. "Restorative justice offers a way of doing things that doesn't rely on punishment and isolation. In restorative justice, we ask who is harmed, what do they need and who has the obligation to meet those needs."

Baliga speaks from personal experience about how survivors' needs often aren't met. Born to Indian immigrants in Shippensburg, Pa., Baliga said her father sexually abused her through her childhood.

In a 2013 interview with the New York Times, Baliga said she grew up feeling alone and ashamed. She explained that she didn't begin to heal until after she graduated from Harvard University, and learned to let go of her anger during a trip to India before starting law school.

Baliga told the Times she had thought about becoming a prosecutor and locking up child molesters. But then she visited Dharamsala, the Himalayan city that is home to a large Tibetan exile community, including the Dalai Lama. She managed to gain an audience with the Nobel Peace Prize winner, who offered two pieces of advice: Meditate and learn to “align myself with my enemy” and “to consider opening my heart to them.”

Baliga said she hopes the MacArthur fellowship brings attention to restorative justice, which she said has the potential to reduce crime, make communities safer and help survivors heal. A study of a restorative justice diversion program offered through Alameda County showed that youth participants were 44 percent less likely to re-offend than offenders not in the program. Meanwhile, 91 percent of victims who participated were satisfied with the program.

“The thing I'm most excited about with this fellowship is that I hope it draws national attention to the approach my organization is taking towards expanding access to restorative justice nationally,” Baliga said. “It can raise awareness that we can do restorative justice instead of criminalizing young people, especially young people of color.”

Meanwhile, Hood, 61, was recently in the news for landing the \$20 million project to upgrade the Oakland Museum of California's rooftop gardens, which have become overgrown and unmanageable, according to a UC Berkeley release. Hood plans to create four levels of terraced gardens that represent the different ecological regions of the state and to connect the gardens and open them up to views of Lake Merritt.

Throughout his career, Hood has focused on creating urban spaces — parks, gardens, playgrounds — that “resonate with and enrich the lives of current residents while also honoring communal histories,” according to the MacArthur Foundation. Hood's speciality is bringing beauty to neglected urban neighborhoods by transforming vacant lots, freeway underpasses and even traffic islands into ecologically sustainable public spaces that residents can enjoy.

“I try to take the most mundane spaces and make people see something beautiful in them,” Hood said in a video put out by the MacArthur Foundation. “These can be parks, these can be streets. Everything is a dormant piece of sculpture in the urban environment.”

One of Hood's best known early projects with his Hood Design Studio was Oakland's Lafayette Square Park in 1999, which features a grassy artificial hill for children to play on, game tables and a performance space for nearby residents.

For the Splash Pad Park, across the street from Oakland's Grand Lake Theater, Hood converted an underutilized turn lane beneath Interstate 580 into an urban park that is now the location for the city's largest weekly farmers market.

One of Hood's latest projects has been to design a memorial garden and the landscaping surrounding the International African American Museum in Charleston, South Carolina.

The museum is being built on the site where nearly 40 percent of enslaved Africans arrived in the United States. Hood's design features native grasses and a tidal pool whose waters will recede at regular intervals to reveal an engraved pattern of life-sized figures, aligned as people were confined within the hold of a slave ship.

"The museum is a great project to show how we honor ecology, history, sustainability and function within a single project," Hood said in the video.