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Restorative Justice Leader sujatha baliga Named a MacArthur Genius

🕒 September 26, 2019 👤 John Kelly



sujatha baliga, head of the National Restorative Justice Project at Impact Justice and a 2019 MacArthur “Genius” winner. Photo: MacArthur Foundation.

sujatha baliga, who helped build one of the nation’s most successful restorative juvenile justice programs in Oakland, Calif., is among this

year's MacArthur Fellows, an honor bestowed by the Chicago-based [John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation](#).

baliga (she does not capitalize her name), who is the director of the Restorative Justice Project at Oakland-based Impact Justice, will receive a no-strings, \$625,000 "genius grant" from the foundation.

"The entire Impact Justice family offers our heartfelt congratulations to sujatha for being selected as a MacArthur Fellow," said Impact Justice President Alex Busansky, [in a statement](#). "We're honored to work with her to create a world where we can meet the needs of crime survivors and offer people opportunities to take accountability for harms they cause without getting pushed into the criminal justice system."

Restorative conferencing requires a victim of a crime who is willing to participate, and a person willing to admit wrongdoing and make amends. The conference brings them both together with family and community members, along with a trained facilitator.

baliga moved to California in 2006 to do appellate work on death penalty cases after serving as a public defender in New York City. In 2008 she received a [Soros Justice Fellowship](#) and used the time it afforded her to develop a community conferencing presence in Oakland, which [The Chronicle of Social Change](#) profiled as part of its [series on positive youth justice](#) in 2015.

baliga, in a statement about the MacArthur award, said her experience as a child sexual abuse survivor was what stoked her interest in restorative models of justice.

"I didn't want to be placed in foster care or for my father to be locked up, and I worried that telling the truth might trigger immigration consequences for my family," she said. "Ultimately, I was drawn to restorative justice because it works best without involving the criminal legal system or other systems of separation and oppression."

Before she began law school, baliga [told The New York Times](#) in 2013, she hand-delivered a letter to the Dalai Lama expressing how her anger motivated her professionally but stifled her personally. She ended up getting to meet him, and he advised her to meditate and "align myself with my enemy; to consider opening my heart to them," she said in the interview.

"I laughed out loud. I'm like: 'I'm going to law school to lock those guys up! I'm not aligning myself with anybody.' He pats me on the knee and says, 'OK, just meditate.'"

sujatha baliga, Attorney and Restorative Justice P



President Trump's administrator for the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Administrator, Caren Harp, identified the proliferation of restorative programs as a priority in an **interview with *The Chronicle*** last year.

"What's so appealing is the accountability," Harp said. "Offenders are face-to-face accountable to the victim. And in that process is where we find remorse, and a real change of direction in terms of their behaviors."

"It can be a diversion program, it can be a sentence alternative with low-level offenders to help them accept harm they've caused and the responsibility to repair, and develop their decision-making skills. Even in a violent case, where there is no substitution for a correctional response, it can still be used to help offenders accept responsibility."



A youth arrested for vandalism created this piece called “Think Before Reacting” as part of his conferencing plan to address the harm. Photo: Community Works

baliga’s program started at Restorative Justice for Oakland’s Youth. When funding issues challenged the organization in 2010, she moved the conferencing program to another nonprofit organization called Community Works.

In 2011, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation awarded Community Works \$1.05 million in federal block grant funding to divert “at least” 95 juveniles per year. The organization continues to operate the conferencing program today.

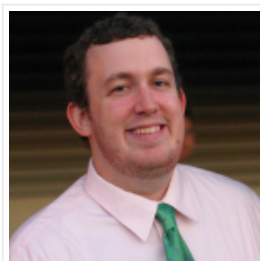
baliga eventually came to serve as national restorative justice director for the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, and **left in 2015** with Busansky to start up Impact Justice.

MacArthur awards genius grants every year to people working in any field that have demonstrated “extraordinary originality and dedication in their creative pursuits and a marked capacity for self-direction.”

Previous MacArthur winners in the field of family and youth services include:

- Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the **Children’s Defense Fund**
- **Bryan Stevenson**, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative

- Keith Hefner, founder of Youth Communication
- Akonadi Foundation President Lateefah Simon
- Kristina Olson, psychologist and researcher on transgender youth
- Regina Benjamin, U.S. Surgeon General under former President Barack Obama
- National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise founder Robert Woodson
- Racial bias researcher [Jennifer Eberhardt](#)



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John Kelly is editor-in-chief of The Chronicle of Social Change.



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