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Seeking American Geniuses

The MacArthur Foundation, a legacy of billionaire John D. MacArthur, has launched an altruistic mission to distribute at least $25 million a year to "creative mavericks," including artists and scientists. "Nominators" have already embarked on search-and-betow sorties to discover geniuses who will be given grants of up to $50,000 a year to "do their own thing" without bureaucratic interference or red tape. In the September issue of Quest-80 magazine John Love, author of "The Touch Code," describes America's newest philanthropic trust, but warns: Don't call the foundation, its nominators will find you.

By John Love

Lorenzo de' Medici, the Renaissance prince, had the romantic notion that the world can be improved by surprising the right people at the right time with a hefty gift of windfall cash. He sent his personal agents roving across Italy "like dogs of the chase, seeking out rare souls and vagabond geniuses for me to encourage." When he found them - poets, philosophers, scientists - he was wise enough to set them up in Florence with free room and board and ample living allowance, and then to leave them alone. The Medici were patrons who were never patronizing. "Men of genius," Lorenzo declared, "need only be humored, never controlled."

The same idea is beginning to unfold in contemporary America, courtesy of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, which aims to launch a breathtaking experiment in human potential with consequences reaching into the next century. A high-powered squad of MacArthur Foundation talent scouts "nominators," with prestigious credentials - will soon fan out across the nation. They will be engaged in a quiet but dramatic search for kind of holy grail: the spunky, brilliant people who are our real national resources. The MacArthur nominators will seek "geniuses" in every field of endeavor and they'll be prepared to offer them no-strings grants of up to $50,000 a year for five-year periods up to 20 years. Some special "laureates" may be awarded generous annual prizes for the rest of their lives.

The MacArthur Foundation is one of America's newest philanthropic trusts. With assets exceeding $500 million, roughly on a par with the Rockefeller Foundation, it is also one of the largest. Only the Ford Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Andrew Mellon Foundation are estimated to have greater assets. Since federal law requires a foundation to dole out 5 percent of its assets annually, the MacArthur Foundation faces the task of giving away a minimum of $25 million every year. Part of that staggering sum will go to a select group of "MacArthur Prize Fellows" who will actually get a call or a knock on the door telling them that they won't have to worry about paying bills for a while.

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Nominators on the Hunt

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Part of the romance and intrigue of the MacArthur Prize Fellowships program is that the prize money — the $50,000 a year grant — has to be "spent" in order to be received. There is no need to compose a lyrical project outline or state of intent either; the MacArthur standard is "it wants it to fund "people, not projects."

MacArthur Prize Fellows won't have to fill out quarterly progress reports to a committee or continually because there will be no supervising committee. If they want, they can take the $50,000 a year grant and found the MacArthur Foundation, like the Medicus, believe that's what it does best when supported and left alone.

J. Roscoe MacArthur, the 58-year-old son of the man whose vast empire was2 be left with $100,000 of assets when his father died, enough to bury his own aposit. His father's only condition was to cover something you don't know exists. No one is sure how much health insurance and so forice. A prize fellow will also have a $1,000 "drawing money" to live on, and then leave them alone.

"Only an occasional person," he says, "will make any money on the idea. We will be free but we will produce a great advance- ment of a great thought — but we will have the money to do so."

To Rod MacArthur, Dr. Bursh's idea was "the mission we had been fighting for that was in keeping with his father's faith in the individual. But we envisaged a different idea and so, if the grant's what we all needed, we'll produce a great advance- ment of a great thought — but we will have the money to do so."

John D. MacArthur, the youngest son of an Evangelical preacher from Pennsylvania, got past the eighth grade. He did get a literary education, but at least his brother Charles, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and playwright who married Bodine Sargent, co-authored the popular play "The American Page."

But John MacArthur decided to follow another brother, Alfred, into the insurance business. In 1928 the future billionaire was fighting whatever he has said. Alfred, who got himself into a rundown building where he founded the cities of Palm Beach Gardens and North Palm Beach; Bankers Life and Casualty Company as well as a package of benefits in- cluding the Gulf & Western building. The Executive offices of the Gulf & Western in Dallas several development companies in New York including the Public Service of New York: radio and TV stations; numer- ous back companies: the Gulf & Western's large fleet and an oil-drilling company.

When he died in 1978 at the age of 80, John D. MacArthur had already organized the MacArthur Foundation to protect his money from the 29 percent inheritance tax bite, and he had named a six-member board to run it.

But the MacArthur Foundation was born the week of its incorporation. I was in- teresting because of its providing the answers to one of the most interesting questions ever asked: What is the nature of genius? John Paul Getty, a sizeable man and one of the world's greatest collectors of art, had raised the unanswered question about the nature of creativity: Does the blood of another person flow in his veins? Would he be possessed by a univer- sity, for example, the foundation does not spend the money but it does spend it. A prize fellow will also have an "account," the "driving force," the "driving force." But just one would justify the idea. The program, Rod MacArthur says, "is an open-ended experiment."

"At first, we wanted to know about creativity and creative minds and we wanted them to work better. At what point in a person's life does stop life do the most damage?"

"We don't want our curiosity to become an obligation. We don't want the Fellows to document the program, to keep track of the obvious exterior- ies. We can get along with our own pocking into their private affairs."

But then they realized that at least they would have some data here, and we hope they'll want to volunteer information or tell us how the Fellows. Even before the program gear up, we're confident that it's once-in-a-million-life- time opportunity for talented Americans to do things that really matter."

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