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life

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-bestow 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 wind-fall 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 Medicis 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

PLAY IT AGAIN, EAR...

The Ear ran away for August. But do you remember this?

THE ROAR OF THE CORFAM, THE SQUEAK OF THE ULTRA



About a week ago, Bill Trumbull and Chris

Core did this hooty deadpan interview with a Nauga Farmer out West. Cackling softly off the WMAL—AM mike, they tossed around pros and cons of raising Naugas for Naugahyde — Black Naugas versus albino Naugas; how to stable your Naugas; their dietary and breeding habits; personality traits; the works. A couple of calls came that day: "You were kidding, weren't you?" And then it was forgotten. Until late last week, when the Fairfax County Public Library called to inquire. "We've had dozens of calls over here for a book on Nauga raising," they said. "Can you help us track one down?" Ear's still hunting Tupperts.

— July 13, 1977

fan out across the nation. They will be engaged in a quiet but dramatic search for a 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: people 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.

See NOMINATORS, C-3

Nominators on the Hunt

Continued From C-1

Part of the romance and intrigue of the MacArthur Prize Fellows program is that no one can apply for a grant; you have to be hunted down by one of the roving scouts. There's no need to compose a lyrical project outline or statement of intent either; the MacArthur Foundation insists it wants to fund "people, not projects."

MacArthur Prize Fellows won't have to fill out quarterly progress reports to a supervising committee, because there will be no supervising committee. If they want, they can take the money and run. The MacArthur Foundation, like the Medicis, believes that genius does what it does best when supported and left alone.

J. Roderick MacArthur, the 58-year-old son of the man whose vast empire provided the foundation with its fortune, puts it this way: "We're betting on individuals rather than institutions. And we want to bet on mavericks particularly — the kind of people who know the rules and want to question them. The idea behind the MacArthur Prize Fellows program is that Einstein could not have written a grant application saying he was going to discover the theory of relativity. You can't write a proposal saying you're going to discover something you don't know exists. Einstein needed to be free, and so do future Einsteins."

John D. MacArthur, the youngest son of an Evangelical preacher from Pennsylvania, never got past the eighth grade. He did get a literary education of sorts from his brother Charles, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and playwright who married Helen Hayes and co-authored the popular play "The Front Page."

But John MacArthur decided to follow another brother, Alfred, into the insurance business. In 1928 the future billionaire was headquartered in a rundown building on the seedy side of Chicago, with assets totaling exactly \$15.34. But he had lots of energy and a unique selling proposition: "Sell a man a policy for whatever he has in his pocket. A dollar a month would provide \$1,000 at death, enough to bury him." The idea worked, and in 1935 he bought the Depression-sick Bankers Life and Casualty Company for \$2,500. MacArthur was soon selling so much health insurance and so many death benefit plans that he could "buy other companies hand over fist."

His empire eventually included 100,000 acres of land in Florida, where he founded the cities of Palm Beach Gardens and North Palm Beach; Bankers Life and 11 subsidiary insurance companies; 61 New York City office buildings including the Gulf & Western building; the Executive Center office complex in Dallas; several development companies and shopping centers around the country; huge parcels of land in Colorado, California and Arizona; six pulp-and-paper companies; radio and TV stations; numerous banks and utilities; a tug and barge 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 fortune from the 70 percent inheritance tax bite, and he had named a six-member board to run it.

But the MacArthur Foundation was born without any sense of mission about anything in particular. The trustees, in the beginning, had conflicting pet ideas. Soon, however, Rod MacArthur was fighting for an idea first proposed by Dr. George E. Burch, a New Orleans cardiologist. Burch contended that most philanthropic dollars are "poured into self-perpetuating programs designed to reflect the opinions of the committees that established them" and are chiefly

"dedicated to the accumulation of data." He had a better idea: Seek out the best minds, give them money to live on, and then leave them alone. "Only an occasional person," he said, "or maybe only one or two, would produce a great advancement or originate a great thought — but just one would justify the cost."

To Rod MacArthur, Dr. Burch's idea was "the mission we had been looking for" and a concept that was in keeping with his father's faith in the individual. But as enthusiastically as he lobbied for the grants-to-geniuses concept, so did other directors raise objections. For two difficult years, the MacArthur Foundation was immobilized by infighting, backbiting, and threatened lawsuits.

But in May 1979 the foundation's crisis seemed resolved by the election of several additional directors. The new directors announced initial grants to the Better Government Association of Chicago and to Amnesty International, indicated a long-term commitment to the mental health field, and endorsed the grants-to-geniuses idea. To launch it, they earmarked \$6.5 million for a two-year pilot program to support up to 50 MacArthur Prize Fellows.

Who's eligible to become a fellow?

"Anyone," says Rod MacArthur. "Everyone. MacArthur Prize Fellows will be innovators from the arts, the humanities, the sciences, every professional discipline you can imagine. We certainly will not be limiting ourselves to scientific researchers."

"Nominators will submit names and together with the foundation staff we will begin to develop information about the nominees to present to the selection committee," says program director Dr. Gerald Freund. "Later in the selection process there will be interviews — but I regard the term interview to be inadequate to describe the ways we will get to know the nominees."

MacArthur Prize Fellows grants will be accompanied by so many generous extras that their actual cash value may approach \$75,000 per year. If a prize fellow happens to be already associated with a university, for example, the foundation will pay for work space and an office. A prize fellow will also have access to an annual \$10,000 "drawing account" for work-related expenses, as well as a package of benefits including health care, insurance and pension plans.

The grants raise a perennially unanswered question about the nature of creativity: Does the blood of a genius race faster when he is pursued by a posse of creditors? Will the MacArthur Foundation money make life so comfortable that even a great inventor or composer might grow lax and drowsy?

"The program," Rod MacArthur says, "is an open-ended experiment. It just might teach us something about creativity and creative minds — how they work, what makes them work better. At what point in a person's life does support do the most good? It's true that when a prize term ends, 're-entry' will be tough, possibly a trauma for some. That's one of the things we'd like to study. "But we don't want our curiosity to become interference. We do intend to document the program, to keep track of the observable exterior progress of these people without poking into their private affairs. There are lessons to be learned here, and we hope they'll want to volunteer information or tell us how things went. But even before the program gears up, we're confident that it's a once-in-a-million-lifetime opportunity for talented Americans to do things that really matter."

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