

FROM NEW YORK PRISONS TO SLUMS OF INDIA AND THAILAND, HUMANITARIANS LAUDED FOR OPUS PRIZE

Finalists Announced for Faith-Based, Million-Dollar Award to be Presented Oct. 16

SPOKANE, Wash. – After searching the world for great faith-based humanitarians, Gonzaga University announces three finalists for the 2014 [Opus Prize](http://www.gonzaga.edu/opus-prize) (www.gonzaga.edu/opus-prize): Sister Tesa Fitzgerald of Hour Children, Queens, New York; Gollapalli Israel, of the Janodayam Social Education Centre in Chennai, India; and Rev. Joseph Maier, of the Mercy Centre Human Development Foundation in Bangkok.

The winner of the Opus Prize, sponsored by the Opus Prize Foundation (www.opusprize.org), will be announced at an Oct. 16 ceremony in Spokane and will be awarded \$1 million to further his or her work; two finalists will be awarded \$100,000 each. Gonzaga will host all three finalists for a series of campus and public events Oct. 14-16.

“These individuals, and the organizations they lead, are among the most courageous in the world,” said Michael Herzog, chair of Gonzaga’s Opus Prize Steering Committee. “They are undaunted by tough, seemingly intractable social problems. They are entrepreneurial in their response. They embody the power of faith committed to justice. And they are inspirational role models for our students and our community. We can’t wait to welcome them to Spokane.”

The 15-month process to seek, nominate and review candidates has been distinguished by the intense involvement of Gonzaga students. “The Opus Prize Foundation intends for this philanthropic work to inspire college students, and it has provided an exceptional educational experience for all those involved,” Herzog said.

THE FINALISTS

Rebuilding New York Families

Sister Teresa “Tesa” Fitzgerald, a Sister of St. Joseph, directs Hour Children, a nonprofit organization in Queens, New York, that provides comprehensive services to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women and their children, reuniting families and building healthy, self-sufficient lives.

The program is named for the important hours that shape the life of children with mothers behind bars: the hour their mother is arrested, the hour children visit their mothers in prison, and the hour of their release.

Hour Children offers housing, education, transportation, day care, job training and employment assistance, and personal and addiction counseling in a compassionate environment. The organization builds hope among women who have had few reasons for hope. More than 80 percent of the women helped by Hour Children have a childhood history of physical and sexual abuse; 82 percent are substance abusers; and, on average, their education ended after seventh-grade.

Hour Children reminds us of the reality that these are OUR children; they are our future, and this organization works to ensure these children a future of hope.

Sister Tesa and her staff are devoted to stopping the cycle of incarceration. While the average rate of female offenders relapsing into criminal behavior and returning to prison nationwide is approximately 30 percent, the recidivism rate for Hour Children has been approximately 5 percent for the past 25 years.

Aiding ‘Untouchables’ in India

For the past 18 years, **Gollapalli Israel** has practiced his Baptist faith working among the Dalit caste – the untouchables – in the slums of Chennai, India. With his education, he could have pursued any professional opportunity; he has chosen to fight for justice and opportunity for his people.

They are among the poorest on earth. While legislation has technically abolished India’s caste system, centuries of stigma remain, and the Dalit or oppressed caste remains at the bottom of the hierarchy. Traditionally, the only occupations open

to Dalits are considered impure: tanning leather, butchering, garbage collection and manual scavenging – a term used to describe cleaning human excrement from latrines, streets and sewers.

Janodayam translates into “People Arise.” Israel leads the Janodayam Social Education Centre. Education, economic independence and awareness of existing rights are the principles embraced by Janodayam. The nonprofit organization’s work includes three main programs:

- Night schools and tutoring have helped thousands of Dalit children pursue better education, including technical courses that lead to living wage jobs;
- A network that empowers Dalit leaders from 132 local slums to advocate for their people’s rights and government assistance by helping them to assemble, organize and negotiate for basic rights; and
- Janodayam teaching coupled with a government micro-loan program has enabled 5,000 Dalit women to start small businesses.

Israel has developed partnerships with local universities. More than 900 young adults from Dalit families have earned undergraduate or graduate degrees, including 10 at the doctoral level.

The Promise of Education in Bangkok

In 1972, **Rev. Joe Maier**, a Redemptorist priest born in Longview, Wash., co-founded the Human Development Foundation Mercy Centre in Klong Toey, the largest slum in Bangkok. Klong Toey is home to more than 100,000 of the city’s poor.

Maier works to empower the men, women and children by arming them with education. Mercy Centre manages 23 kindergartens for more than 3,000 children. It operates special schools for street children and secures scholarships for more than 1,000 children annually.

Other Mercy Centre programs target complex social issues. Father Joe, as he is known, and his staff work with police to keep children out of the hands of human traffickers. They’ve built 10,000 homes, plus playgrounds and sports facilities. They established a women’s credit union to fight loan sharking and help women control their finances. They provide home care to some 360 patients suffering from HIV/AIDS and related diseases. Constantly, they are prepared with emergency relief.

A fearless social entrepreneur, Maier and his staff have built one of the most successful NGOs in Thailand starting with modest, practical solutions and refining and expanding implementation for stronger impact and results. Along the way, he has earned the respect and love of not only the poor but government officials, and the Buddhist monks and local imam who pray with him.

Father Joe models for the world community advocacy to serve the poor, a bedrock of Catholic social teaching.

Since 2004, the Opus Prize Foundation has partnered annually with a Catholic university to secure nominations from around the globe, to involve students in the review and evaluation process, and to host an awards ceremony. The 2014 awards ceremony and community reception will take place at Spokane’s Martin Woldson Theater at the Fox.

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