



### **Moroccan receives \$1 million Opus Prize**

*Aïcha Ech Channa provides services for unmarried women and their children in Casablanca*

**St. Paul, Minn. (Nov. 4, 2009)** – Aïcha Ech Channa, founder and president of a Casablanca, Morocco, organization that provides services to unmarried women with children, is the winner of the \$1 million 2009 Opus Prize.

The University of St. Thomas and the Opus Prize Foundation of Minnetonka conferred the award Wednesday night at an event in Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis. The other two finalists – Sister Valeriana García-Martín of Bogotá, Colombia, and Father Hans Stapel of Guaratinguetá, Brazil – each received \$100,000 awards.

The honorees, who will use the award money from the Opus Prize Foundation to further their faith-based humanitarian efforts, were recognized as unsung heroes creatively transforming lives through a commitment to service and social entrepreneurship.

“The Opus Prize recognizes individuals whose work and story can inspire us to tackle the world’s most deeply rooted problems,” said Amy Sunderland, executive director of Opus Prize Foundation. “They demonstrate what faith, will and vision can do to make our world a better place. They show us change is possible.”

While the Opus Prize Foundation has worked in partnership with Catholic universities since 2004 to make the annual award, the recipient may have roots in any faith.

### **Aïcha Ech Channa of Casablanca, Morocco**

Ech Channa, 68, is something of an icon in Morocco when it comes to human and civil rights for single mothers and their children. During the 1980s she worked in the Moroccan Ministry of Social Affairs where she was confronted daily by the ordeals of single mothers.

She recalled an afternoon in a social worker's office where a single mother was giving up her baby for adoption. "This mom was breastfeeding her baby, which means she never wanted to abandon it. And at the moment when she forcibly took away her breast from the baby's mouth, the milk sprayed all over the baby's face and the baby cried. This cry was in my head. And that night I did not sleep. I swore to do something."

In 1985, Ech Channa founded the Association Solidarité Féminine in Casablanca to provide services for single women and their children. She started in a basement and now operates three day-care centers and training schools, two restaurants, four kiosks and a hammam (fitness center and spa).

More than 50 women receive training every year in literacy, human rights, cooking, baking, sewing, fitness services and accounting. Participants also receive daily child care and medical treatments in addition to social, psychological and legal support and counseling for better reintegration in their society.

Ech Channa, a Muslim, says she gains inspiration from a sense of justice rooted in the value systems of all religions.

"I want Solidarité Féminine to be a model that provides an example for the respect of human rights, economic development and confidence in humanism," she says. "This is a model that can be carried everywhere in the world."

Her organization was officially recognized in 2002 by the government as a charitable organization and has received support from Moroccan King Mohammed VI.

### **Sister Valeriana García-Martín of Bogotá, Colombia**

Sister Valeriana García-Martín is founder and director of the Asociación Hogares Luz y Vida, which cares for 140 children with physical and mental disabilities and educates or provides day care services for 860 children from the community.

García-Martín, 68, a native of Spain, was working as a Sister of Filippense at the National Institute for Blind Children in Bogotá in 1991 when she left to open a home for four abandoned infants with disabilities.

She established Hogares Luz y Vida – Homes of Light and Life – which today has eight locations in the Bogotá area and includes an elementary school and day care centers that integrate children with and without disabilities.

García-Martín chose the name because even blind children need light and life, and they receive those through unconditional love. "The life I wish for these children is one of quality, because they deserve that," she says. "All we do is with quality, with love. If we are able to come near and give them a hug, then we must do it with love. If we are going to give them food, we give it with love. If we are going to clean their little faces, we do it with love."

She adopted two girls, both Luz y Vida residents under her care, in the 1990s. Valeriana, 25, is blind and is studying in Spain. Rosita, who cannot speak and is wheelchair-bound because of cerebral palsy, is 18 and attends the Luz y Vida school.

### **Father Hans Stapel, O.F.M., of Guaratinguetá, Brazil**

Father Hans Stapel is co-founder and president of Fazenda da Esperança – Farms of Hope – which has established more than 60 therapeutic communities in 10 countries to help people with drug and alcohol addictions rebuild their lives.

Stapel, 64, a native of Germany, is a Franciscan priest and in 1979 became pastor of Our Lady of the Glory Church in Guaratinguetá, northeast of Sao Paulo. He established Fazenda da Esperança in 1983 to help drug addicts in Guaratinguetá, and the enterprise has grown to include operations in Argentina, Guatemala, Germany, Mexico, Mozambique, Paraguay, the Philippines, Russia and Uruguay. A farm soon will open in Portugal.

Addicts live in houses of 14 persons for a year, supporting each other and guided by two recovering addicts. As many as 2,000 people are under care at any one time. More than 10,000 people have participated in the program and 80 percent have abstained from further drug use.

"In the first part, we are the ones who carry them," says Stapel. "After that, they are able to walk for themselves. But the most important part is the third one, when they are the ones who will carry others."

### **How the Opus Prize is awarded**

The Opus Prize recipients were selected through a process administered by St. Thomas. Dr. Charles Keffer, former provost, chaired a committee that began its work last year.

The confidential selection process began with 18 people around the world nominating 23 candidates. The St. Thomas committee narrowed the list to 10, and a "jury" of community leaders submitted the three finalists to the foundation's board. St. Thomas students, faculty and staff accompanied foundation representatives on due-diligence visits with the finalists in May and June, after which the foundation board chose the winners of the \$1 million and \$100,000 prizes.

In addition to Wednesday's event at Orchestra Hall, the three honorees are participating in a series of activities at the University of St. Thomas including luncheon discussions with St. Thomas students, staff and faculty.

"St. Thomas has been honored to serve this year as a partner to award the Opus Prize," said Father Dennis Dease, president. "We have been proud to host the winners on Our campus, and I know they have been a real inspiration to our students, faculty, staff and the larger community."

To read more about the 2009 Opus Prize and the award recipients, visit <http://www.stthomas.edu/opusprize> or [www.opusprize.org](http://www.opusprize.org).

### **About the Opus Prize Foundation**

The Opus Prize Foundation recognizes unsung heroes of any faith tradition, anywhere in the world, solving today's most persistent social problems by annually awarding the Opus Prize, a \$1 million award and two \$100,000 monetary awards.

Opus Prize winners combine a driving entrepreneurial spirit with an abiding faith to give power to the disenfranchised, opportunities to the poorest, and inspire others to pursue lives of service.

The prize is awarded through partnerships with Catholic universities or colleges to maximize the scope and impact of its mission. The first Opus Prize was given in 2004. Today, 16 individuals from the United States and around the world have been recognized. The Opus Prize Foundation, established in 1994 by the founding chairman of Opus Corporation, is a private and independent foundation and does not accept unsolicited nominations. For more information, visit [www.opusprize.org](http://www.opusprize.org).

### **About University of St. Thomas**

The University of St. Thomas is Minnesota's largest private college or university, with 11,000 students and campuses in St. Paul, Minneapolis, Owatonna and Rome.