



\$1 Million Opus Prize Finalists Announced

Nominees' faith-based social entrepreneur work is changing lives in Brazil, Colombia and Morocco

St. Paul, Minn. (Sept. 8, 2009) — The University of St. Thomas and the Opus Prize Foundation will honor social entrepreneurs from Brazil, Colombia and Morocco in November, and one will receive a \$1 million award from the foundation to further his or her faith-based humanitarian work.

The finalists are Aïcha Ech Channa, who provides services for unmarried women and their children in Casablanca, Morocco; Sister Valeriana García-Martín, who cares for disabled children in Bogotá, Colombia; and Father Hans Stapel of Guaratinguetá, Brazil, who operates more than 60 communities for people with drug and alcohol addictions.

"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 the foundation. "These finalists demonstrate what faith, will and vision can do to make our world a better place. They show us change is possible."

The Opus Prize is a \$1 million award, with \$100,000 awards going to the other finalists, to recognize unsung heroes who create lasting social change and inspire others to do the same. The winner will be announced during a presentation at 8 p.m. Nov. 4 at Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis. Free tickets for the public event are required and can be obtained beginning Oct. 1 at the St. Thomas Box Office, the Orchestra Hall Box Office, www.minnesotaorchestra.org or (612) 371-5656.

Luncheon discussions with the finalists and students, faculty and staff will be held Nov. 5 on St. Thomas' St. Paul and Minneapolis campuses to highlight the congruence between the university's mission and the honorees' work.

"St. Thomas is honored to be chosen by the foundation as a partner to award the Opus Prize," said Father Dennis Dease, president. "We will be proud to host the winners on our campus, and I know they will be a real inspiration to our students, faculty, staff and the larger community."

The following individuals are finalists for the 2009 Opus Prize for their social entrepreneurship, transformational leadership and commitment to faith and service (please contact St. Thomas if you want their photos):

Aïcha Ech Channa of Casablanca, Morocco

Aïcha Ech Channa is something of an icon in Morocco when it comes to human and civil rights for single mothers and their children.

For more than 30 years, the 68-year-old woman has been their defender and public spokesperson. In 1985, Ech Channa founded the Association Solidarité Féminine in Casablanca to provide services for the unmarried 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 re-integration in their society.

"We have hundreds of success stories," she said. They are "women who are working, studying, raising their children – a productive part of our society."

Ech Channa, a Muslim, is inspired by a sense of justice rooted in the value systems of all religions. "For too long," she said, "single mothers have been stigmatized, had their babies taken away. The baby belongs with the mother, and we have hundreds of cases as evidence that this can work. Children who stay with their mothers and benefit from the association's services grow healthier physically and psychologically, and do very well at school and in society."

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 145 physically and mentally disabled children and educates or provides day care services for 850 children from the community.

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

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. “Some will not be able to walk or go to school, but they deserve to be held with love,” she said. “If you do not do things with love, it is better not to do them at all.”

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 in Guaratinguetá, and the enterprise has grown to include operations in Argentina, Guatemala, Germany, Mexico, Mozambique, Paraguay, the Philippines, Russia and Uruguay.

Addicts live in houses of 14 persons for a year, supporting each other and guided by two recovering addicts. More than 10,000 people have participated in the program and 80 percent have abstained from further drug use.

Every day, residents choose Gospel phrases on which to model their behaviors. “This is a very accurate way of putting the words of God into practice,” Stapel said. “God is saying, ‘Everything you do for others, you do for me.’ I believe in every creature is the presence of God.”

Pope Benedict XVI visited Fazenda da Esperança in May 2007 and gave his blessing to 2,000 current and former fazenda residents who came from around the world to see him.

How the Opus Prize is awarded

The Opus Prize recipients were selected through a process administered by St. Thomas. Dr. Charles Keffer, former provost, is chairing 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, including Dease, 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.

To read more about the 2009 Opus Prize announcement and the award recipients, visit www.stthomas.edu/opusprize or 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.

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.