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East Bay MacArthur Fellows discuss their six- figure ideas

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Posted: 05/12/2011 01:05:37 PM PDT

Updated: 05/12/2011 02:11:08 PM PDT

Carlos Bustamante was fixing breakfast when he got the call.

Emmanuel Saez was in his office when he got the call.

Dawn Song was having lunch with friends when she got the call.

And on a Thursday in April, the East Bay MacArthur Fellows gathered at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center to explain how they became recipients of the \$500,000 no-strings-attached fellowship awards. Informally, these have come to be known as "genius grants."

"I had just come home from a trip," Bustamante explained. "At first, I thought they were calling for donations and said 'Nah ' before I realized what was happening. Turns out there's another Bustamante -- at Berkeley -- so they started reading this other biography, and I said, 'Oh no, how can this be?' Then they said, 'We're just kidding .' Who does that?" he told the audience gathered in the library's community hall. "But I still took their money!" he added, to appreciative laughter.

The grants, each a cool half million dollars delivered over a five-year period, arrived without reporting or spending requirements.

"After I found out, I only called my wife, because they tell you that you can only tell one person," Saez said in an interview moments before his formal presentation.

Asked how it felt to be a "genius" and what he might do with the funds, Saez joked he would use the money to buy five SUV's before admitting, "You

know, I'm already paid to do what I do, so I will just continue. But now,

I will be able to fund additional studies and hire students to assist me."

Each year, approximately 100 nominators roam the United States, looking for scientists, musicians, choreographers, writers, mathematicians, teachers, and other creative individuals whose work falls into the "genius" category. A selection committee reviews the nominations, then makes recommendations to the president and board of directors of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Unlike the popular media and the general public, the foundation avoids using the term "genius," calling the term too narrow to define the qualities the grants are intended to honor.

The MacArthurs formed the large, private philanthropy in 1970, directing their money to effective, creative people whose work contributed to a peaceful, just world.

The list of 828 recipients has few familiar names. Perhaps to combat their obscurity, the Commonwealth Club-sponsored the Lafayette library event, giving the trio an opportunity to explain their projects, which centered on three subjects hot on the minds of Bay Area residents -- income taxes for the wealthy, health care costs and Internet security.

Central Contra Costa seems like a good audience for these achievers, and the new Lafayette library a good venue, said Kathy Merchant, executive director



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of the Lafayette Library and Learning Center Foundation.

"When the Lafayette community conceived its Library and Learning Center, a key part of the vision was the Glenn Seaborg Learning Consortium," Merchant said. "What more appropriate program could the Commonwealth Club bring than the MacArthur 'geniuses' who have reached the pinnacle of intellectual and entrepreneurial accomplishment?"

Bustamante, a professor in the Department of Genetics at Stanford University School of Medicine, studies DNA data to learn about populations.

"The human genome project has had a tremendous spillover into other areas," he began, before asking, "Will the billions of dollars invested in it pay off?"

Not bothering to wait for a reply, he answered the question himself.

Because of it, we can map genes for traits, study things like Bipolar disorder, Type 1 and 2 Diabetes, strokes, schizophrenia and understand diseases between populations and between individuals."

Suddenly, Bustamante leapt to grapes, pointing to a graphic image and saying, "Each of these [clusters] represents a pattern of variation; wild grapes separated from domesticated grapes. You can see it's a tour through parent and child relationships because grapes are actually from a single family."

In a blink, he catapulted off grapes, drawing surprisingly clear links between increased diversity in medical research and reductions in diseases and their associated costs.

Saez, an E. Morris Cox Professor of Economics at UC Berkeley, began his presentation with a familiar question: How should we tax upper incomes?

His data showed that income distribution has followed a "U"-shaped pattern over the past 90 years. He pointed repeatedly to the evidence that one percent of the population currently holds most of the country's wealth.

His comparative studies also revealed a vast discrepancy between the United States, France and Japan.

"All three countries are similar in the first period, in

the early 20th century," he said. "What is really striking is the divergence in the last period. Growth in France and Japan stayed relatively constant from 1950s on. The U.S. is extreme in that the top income have increased immensely. Technology has made top talent more valuable and squeezed out ordinary workers. But this hasn't happened in continental Europe or Japan, so technology can't be the only explanation."

Saez, running over his allotted time, finished quickly, saying, "I have yet to write about what tax reform in this country should be. You hear a lot about tax cuts, but I really think with the upper income, we should go the other direction."

Dawn Song, an associate professor in the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science at UC Berkeley, had her own question.

"Do you know what may happen when you click a link?" she asked. "The link may be leading you to a malicious website," she said, mentioning worms, botnets and Trojan horses, and describing viruses that alter their symptoms to avoid elimination.

"Around 2007, we saw a new change. The interactions of components and protocols caused new problems. Today, sensitive information is being kept in the clouds. It's expensive and challenging for service providers to protect consumers from Internet hacks. We are developing new technologies to protect users' data and to make it easier for the information to be managed securely," she said.

In a brief Q and A session, library audience



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members asked about how the grantees choose their projects.

"The highbrow answer is, 'things I'm interested in.' The realistic answer is, 'where the funding is invested,' " Bustamante answered.

Another question came from Lafayette City Manager and moderator Steve Falk: What can you tell us about the types of people who become threats to Internet security?

"In the early 2000s they were people who wanted to explore fame for fun. Eventually, we saw cyber criminals move into the space when they realized they could make money. Now, more and more, you see sophisticated attacks involving nuclear facilities and people with a lot more resources," Song responded.

Saez fielded a double-pronged question asking if we could learn from the Japanese and French and how to convert his findings into policy.

"If you look at them one by one, it's hard to find [answers]. You have to look at the market, labor practices, social norms. That is why I start from a simple place: share more broadly by having those who have benefited most, share more of the burden," he said.

Charged with packing the genius of three into 60 minutes, the evening inevitably left loose ends. A phone call had changed their lives: only the passage of time will tell if their work will change ours.



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