

Braddock artist wins MacArthur Foundation 'genius' grant

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John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

LaToya Ruby Frazier

By Joe Smydo / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

A Braddock native known for evocative, unflinching photographs of her hometown has been named one of 24 recipients of a 2015 “genius” grant from the MacArthur Foundation.

LaToya Ruby Frazier, 33, whose photography, videography and video art have led her in the footsteps of social activists and storytellers, is the fourth Pittsburgher in five years to win the prestigious fellowship.

It pays \$625,000 over five years, with no evaluations or other strings attached. Officially, recipients are called MacArthur Fellows. Unofficially, the awards are called genius grants because of the recipients’ creativity and innovation.

'Genius' grant winner LaToya Ruby Frazier



LaToya Ruby Frazier is a photographer, videographer and performance artist known for capturing life in her native Braddock. (Video courtesy of MacArthur Foundation)

The Chicago-based foundation calls the award “an investment in a person’s originality, insight and potential” and a way to help recipients pursue their “creative instincts for the benefit of human society.” Ms. Frazier, who told the foundation in a video that the camera helped her combat feelings of economic powerlessness, said she’ll use the grant to continue telling the story of Braddock residents battling social and economic decline.

“What they’re facing now has to be documented,” said Ms. Frazier, who last year published “The

“Notion of Family,” a book that tells Braddock’s story through photos of herself, her mother and grandmother. Over 12 years, Ms. Frazier, an assistant professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, also documented her community’s unsuccessful fight to save UPMC Braddock and other aspects of community life. Her work has appeared in numerous exhibitions.

Other recipients this year include Kartik Chandran, an environmental engineer at Columbia University in New York who works on recycling wastewater; Ellen Bryant Voigt, a poet from Cabot, Vt.; and Mimi Lien, a New York set designer.

“Their work, their commitment and their creativity inspire us all,” Julia Stasch, foundation president, said on the MacArthur website.

Recipients this decade with local ties are University of Pittsburgh poet Terrance Hayes, last year; dancer-choreographer Kyle Abraham, 2013; and former Pitt parasitologist/virologist Elodie Ghedin, 2011. Previous MacArthur fellows from the region include Luis von Ahn, associate professor of computer science at Carnegie Mellon University, who created the language learning app Duolingo, 2006; Christopher Beard, former curator and head of vertebrate paleontology at Carnegie Museum of Natural History, 2000; and William Strickland, founder of the Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild, 1996.

The MacArthur grant is the latest in a series of high profile awards for Ms. Frazier, who divides her time between Pittsburgh and Chicago. She received a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation fellowship last year and was Guna S. Mundheim Fellow in the visual arts at the American Academy in Berlin from 2013 to 2014.

Her photos, many of them black and white, offer a stark look at how Braddock’s decline has affected the community landscape and the bodies of those living there. On her website (latoyarubyfrazier.com), photos of dilapidated buildings are interspersed with searing images of herself, relatives and other residents. Ms. Frazier, whose ancestors left the South for Braddock in the early 1900s, said she has provided some of the few accounts of black families there.

She said her work follows the tradition of socially conscious photographers such as Gordon Parks, who trained his lens on poverty and civil rights, and Lewis Hine, who early last century documented America’s child-labor abuses and photographed social conditions for the Pittsburgh Survey. Also, she said she considers herself an heir of the storytelling tradition embodied by Braddock filmmaker Tony Buba and Thomas Bell, whose novel “Out of This Furnace” told a story of immigrant labor.

“I just hope I make Pittsburgh proud,” Ms. Frazier said.