

New Yorker Sister Tesa Fitzgerald Wins 2014 Opus Prize, \$1 Million Award

Award Advances Work Helping Incarcerated Women, Their Children

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Newswise — SPOKANE, Washington – [Sister Teresa Fitzgerald](#), who directs the nonprofit organization Hour Children in Queens, New York, dedicated to transforming the lives of female offenders and their children, was honored tonight with the 2014 Opus Prize for faith-based humanitarian work. Sister Tesa, as she is known, said the \$1 million award will provide desperately needed housing for the women and children Hour Children serves.

“We are really in need of additional living space where we can welcome women from prison for the opportunity to reunite with their children. That’s a real thing. The money would be used for the acquisition of an additional site,” she said.

The two additional finalists for the Opus Prize, [Gollapalli Israel](#), of the Janodayam Social Education Centre in Chennai, India, and [Rev. Joseph Maier](#), of the Mercy Centre Human Development Foundation in Bangkok, received \$100,000 each. The awards were announced at a ceremony and community reception at the Martin Woldson Theater at The Fox hosted by Gonzaga in partnership with the Opus Prize Foundation.

Gonzaga was selected by the Opus Prize Foundation to administer this year’s award. The 22-month process to seek, nominate and review candidates has been distinguished by the intense involvement of Gonzaga students, according to Michael Herzog, chair of Gonzaga’s Opus Prize Steering Committee. “The Opus Prize Foundation intends for this philanthropic work to inspire college students, and it has provided an exceptional and broad educational experience for all those involved,” said Herzog.

Don Neureuther, executive director of the Opus Prize Foundation, said Sister Tesa’s work represents the best faith-based humanitarian work being done in the world today.

“Our penchant in the U.S. for incarcerating record numbers of men and women, particularly people of color, makes this one of the great social issues of our time. Sister Tesa and her staff have developed one of the most successful program models in the country because they respond with passion to the needs of each woman and child, and their personal commitment is grounded in a deep faith that is lived in service to others.”

Gonzaga President Thayne McCulloh expressed his profound thanks to the Opus Prize Foundation for the opportunities the Opus Prize has afforded Gonzaga faculty, staff, and especially students to be intimately involved in learning from some of our world’s best social entrepreneurs about how to create social change.

“Over the last two years, we have enjoyed a very productive partnership with the Opus Prize Foundation, an organization that has helped Gonzaga to affirm and enrich our own basic Mission values. The opportunities our students have had to learn from outstanding humanitarians like Sr. Tesa, Gollapalli Israel, and Father Joe Maier are invaluable. The opportunities even a few of our students have had to help select the Opus Prize winner are extraordinary,” McCulloh said.

Sister Tesa, 68, who is celebrating her 50th year in the Sisters of St. Joseph, founded Hour Children in 1986 when she became a foster parent to eight children of incarcerated mothers at the

convent where she lived. In 1992, when Hour Children became a 501 (c) (3) organization, she offered support services to other incarcerated mothers and their children. Before that, she was responsible for New York state curriculum oversight for Catholic elementary schools for the Diocese of Brooklyn, and was both a principal and teacher at Catholic elementary schools. Hour Children is named for the important hours that shape the lives of children with mothers behind bars: the hour their mothers are 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. It builds hope among women who have had few reasons for hope. “We have 38 units of permanent housing plus communal living space in five different houses. We are scattered all around this Borough of Queens – all within walking distance or a quick train or bus ride; the women can easily access the services here in our immediate vicinity,” said Sister Tesa, who believes the small, residential housing facilities work best for the more than 70 women and 70-plus children in transition.

“A woman came out just last week with a baby from the prison nursery and she said, ‘I never imagined it would be this nice.’ It has a real intimacy and homey-ness about it that keeps people feeling welcome. That’s the model we would like to continue.”

The homes facilitate interaction and community-building among the women.

“Sadly many of the women have not had women-to-women relationships. A lot of their relationships were around men and needing men. Peer friendship and support is very important to their progress,” Sister Tesa said. “I do think this community building is important and helps the women feel a sense of trust and support that helps them in their struggles. The word ‘struggle’ is very much a part of their lives.”

Indeed, more than 80 percent of the women helped by Hour Children have a childhood history of physical or sexual abuse (or both), 82 percent have addiction issues, and the women’s average education level is seventh-grade.

“A lot of them have addiction issues to deal with. If they lose sight of that it’s probably the beginning of the end. We have case managers and therapists work with them to – No. 1 – acknowledge it,” Sister Tesa said. “The issue of staying clean is a big one. If that is an issue, we work with a woman to make sure she goes in for a 28-day detox program but the children stay in our community. The other women step up to take care of the children while their mothers deal with recovery.”

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 less than 5 percent. So what else, besides a focus on building community, is Sister Tesa doing to be so successful?

While humbly insisting there’s no special secret to the organization’s success – aside from “the combination of a lot of good people’s efforts” – Sister Tesa says nothing promotes a sense of personal independence like a job.

“They have to be channeled into a work program where they have the ability to make money while they are seeking to improve their lives and get better jobs,” she said. “They have to work from day one for the money they get and they’re able to do that. They look around and see role models moving into better jobs. In prison the stories are abundant about meeting dead ends when they get out. No job skills, no opportunities. Out here they can see positive role models and say, ‘If she can do it, then I can.’ ”

Sister Tesa, who has been known to spend hours simply hugging a woman, knows well the power of unconditional love – particularly for women suffering from the many insidious forms of abuse.

“Physical abuse is one thing and that’s very definable and tragic, but the verbal abuse, the abuse of being told ‘you’re stupid’ and not being given the resources to develop your God-given gifts . . . we hear that over and over again and it causes women to feel very unworthy,” she said.

“Abuse, in all of its forms, is a common thread.”

Work release programs in New York state require women find a job within six weeks of finishing drug treatment or they must go back to prison. Sister Tesa received a call recently from a prison official saying he feared a 48-year-old illiterate, Rosie, was bound to return to prison.

“We brought her over here last week,” Sister Tesa said. “She came in with a frightened look on her face and she said to us, ‘I don’t want to go back to prison.’ She sobbed and said, ‘I don’t know what work is. I’ve never worked.’ She is now working at our thrift shop. She’s a real eager beaver and our best advertisement. Little Rosie needed that opportunity and, more importantly, look what it has done for her self-esteem.”

Ultimately, love is “the real connector here,” says Sister Tesa. “One of our mottos is, ‘Love makes a difference.’ Love takes many shapes and forms and opportunities. Sometimes it’s outright love or gentle love or openness that’s exhibited by all the staff from top to bottom. I just walked a man around here and that was one of his comments. He said ‘the whole place is love-centered, people are so warm and welcoming.’ It has worked for us on a day-to-day basis.”

Spirituality, a daily connection with a loving God, permeates Sister Tesa’s work.

“I bookend my days with it, and it goes through my whole day,” she said. “It’s something that is part of all my actions, thoughts and words. Sometimes you fail at it or you make a lot of mistakes in it. Certainly, I know that a loving God has called me to do this and is bringing a lot of people into this work,” she said. “It’s not my work but all of our work. God brings a lot of people into it whether they be Catholic, Protestant, Jewish or of other faiths.”

Sister Tesa has found spirituality in its rawest and most powerful form while ministering to women behind prison walls.

“People are stripped of everything there and their own life experiences are reflected,” she said.

“One thing they have taught me is that what it’s really all about is practicing what we preach. The Gospel is in action behind prison walls and out here in the community. Each person has to be called to it. There is a spiritual dimension that is very important and we try to honor it in whatever ways we can – whether it’s silence before meals or in other ways.”

For interviews with Sister Tesa, please contact Rob Zopf, development director for Hour Children, at (718) 433-4724 x305 or send him an email request at robz@hourchildren.org. For more information, please contact Mary Joan Hahn, Gonzaga’s director of community and public relations at (509) 313-6095 or Hahn@gonzaga.edu or Don Neureuther, executive director of the Opus Prize Foundation at (239) 213-8100 or don.teamliftinc@gmail.com.