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# 4 with Boston-area ties get 'genius grants'

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 28, 2013

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**Robin Fleming of Boston College**

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MIT planetary scientist Sara Seager gets a lot of strange phone calls, from people wanting to talk about UFOs, aliens, and the like. She has an assistant screen the calls.

So when she got a call a few weeks ago saying that she had been named a MacArthur Fellow, which brings a \$625,000 “genius grant,” she was skeptical. Only an e-mail from the MacArthur Foundation made her check further, and she learned the news was not a hoax after all.

Seager was one of four people with ties to Boston-area schools who are among the 24 individuals named this week as 2013 MacArthur Fellows, winning the prize commonly known as a genius grant.

Robin Fleming, 57, a history professor and California native who lives in Cambridge, became the first-ever MacArthur Fellow from Boston College. Seager and computer scientist and Cambridge resident

Dina Katabi, both 42, are professors at MIT, which has now had 22 faculty and staff members win the awards.

Another “genius grant” winner this year, jazz pianist and composer Vijay Iyer, 41, of New York City, is scheduled in January to join Harvard’s faculty as the music department’s Franklin D. and Florence Rosenblatt Professor of the Arts.

And most of them didn’t quite believe it when they first heard the news.

Katabi did not believe the man who called her to tell her she had won. She looked up the foundation’s number and called it directly to confirm.

“I thought someone was playing a joke on me — that it was a prank,” she said.

Katabi, a native of Syria, earned a doctorate from MIT in 2003 and has taught in the institute’s electrical engineering and computer science department since.

As a communications researcher focused on wireless data transmission, she has found ways “to improve the speed, reliability, and security of data exchange.”

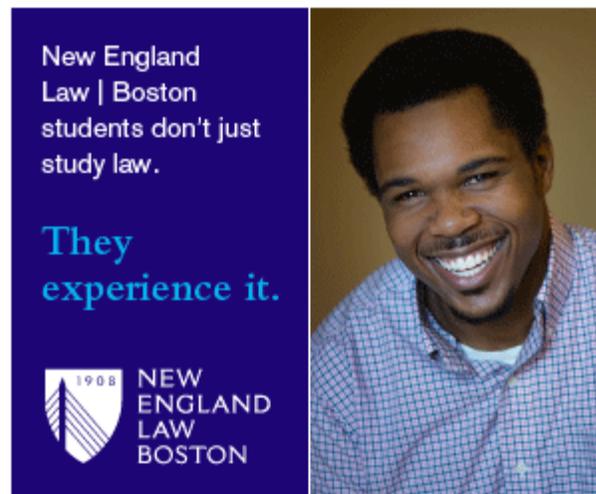
Reached by phone Wednesday, she said she “feels great” to have received such a distinct honor.

“It’s also a weird feeling,” Katabi added. “On the one hand I’m very happy, excited, shocked, and also humbled.”

Fleming, chairwoman of the history department at BC, said she found out about three weeks ago when she got a phone call “out of the blue” informing her she had been chosen as a fellow.

“I almost fell over and I don’t remember the conversation very clearly,” she said. “It’s been really, really hard to keep a secret.”

She said the money will allow her to take some time off



JOHN D. AND CATHERINE T. MACARTHUR FOUNDATION VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

**Musician Vijay Iyer**

from teaching and administrative duties at BC so she can focus on her latest project, which involves writing history with researchers and academics from other disciplines.

Her expertise as a historian focuses on “life in Britain in the tumultuous centuries during and after the fall of the Roman Empire,” which she recounts through books, articles, and other writings using “an artful blending of archaeological and textual sources.”

Seager, a Toronto native and professor of planetary science and physics with a doctorate from Harvard, joined the MIT faculty in 2006.

Her work includes “exploring the possibility of life throughout the galaxy” by focusing her studies on exoplanets, or planets outside our solar system, and trying to find planets that resemble Earth.

“She is quickly advancing a subfield initially viewed with skepticism by the scientific community,” the foundation said.

She called being named a fellow “a huge honor.” “It’s a big deal. I hope it can help me continue with my work,” including by giving exposure to projects she has been working on.

She said she plans to use the grant money “on the home front” to help pay for personal expenses to care for herself and her children.

Iyer, a pianist, composer, band leader, electronic musician, and writer who hails from Rochester, N.Y., is “forging a new conception of jazz and American creative music,” the foundation said.

His albums have ranged from music influences by South Indian classical music, West African drumming, contemporary European composers, and 20th-century African-American piano masters to “imaginatively rearranging” works by Stevie Wonder, Leonard Bernstein, Duke Ellington, Michael Jackson, M.I.A., and others, the foundation said.



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**Dina Katabi**

Iyer called the award “life-changing.”

Each fellow will receive a stipend of \$625,000 paid out over five years. The money can be spent however the recipient chooses, with “no strings attached,” according to the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, which doles out the grants.

The program aims to recognize “exceptionally creative individuals with a track record of achievement and the potential for even more significant contributions in the future,” said a statement from the foundation.

Since the MacArthur Fellows program began in 1981, 897 fellows have been named, including this year’s class.

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**Sara Seager of MIT**

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