

Biologist receives prestigious award

Slingerlands woman is named MacArthur Fellow

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EAST GREENBUSH -- Stem-cell biologist Sally Temple of Slingerlands has been awarded a MacArthur "genius award."

Temple, 49, who heads the not-for-profit New York Neural Stem Cell Institute on the University at Albany's east campus here, has spent two decades seeking a breakthrough in the treatment of age-related macular degeneration, Parkinson's disease and spinal cord injury.

She was one of 25 exceptionally creative individuals to be named MacArthur Fellows this year. The award provides \$500,000, no strings attached, paid in installments over the next five years.

"I was stunned and amazed," said Temple, a mother of three, who was working at home last Monday when a representative from the John D. and Katherine T. MacArthur Foundation called.

The MacArthur rep asked if she was alone and sitting down before dropping the half-million-dollar bombshell. Recipients cannot nominate themselves and do not know they're being considered for the award in a highly confidential review process that can go on for a year or more.

"We're looking for that distinctly cutting-edge and imaginative person for the MacArthur. Sally Temple is just such a person," said Daniel Socolow, director of the MacArthur Fellows Program.

"Like the other fellows, Sally has shown enormous creativity and great promise to do important future work," Socolow said.

Temple said her best creative ideas come to her unexpectedly, when she's relaxed and immersed in her quotidian routine: watching her kids' sporting events, scrambling to put dinner on the table, walking through her neighborhood.

"Being a scientist is a good career for mothers, because you can work at midnight while feeding babies," she said.

Her daughter, Rebecca, 19, is a sophomore at Yale University. Her son, Sam, 16, is a junior at Bethlehem High School, and Josh, 13, attends Bethlehem Middle School.

Temple's independent institute has a staff of 20, with an annual budget of about \$1 million. Her funding comes mainly from the National Institutes of Health and New York state. She also holds adjunct teaching appointments at Albany Medical College, RPI and UAlbany.

Temple is the third MacArthur Fellow with a UAlbany connection. Short story writer Lydia Davis, a professor of creative writing at UAlbany, won in 2003, and novelist William Kennedy founded the New York State Writers Institute at UAlbany with some of his 1983 award money.

Temple had to keep the announcement secret for an entire week after being advised she could not tell anyone other than her spouse until Tuesday's official announcement.

"He was thrilled for me," Temple said of her husband, Dr. Jeffrey Stern, a retina surgeon. She worked while he attended medical school.

Temple couldn't even share the news with her 83-year-old mother, a retired nurse who suffers from macular degeneration, back home in York, England.

Temple, who has dual British and American citizenship, was born and reared in Newbiggin-in-Teesdale in northern England, a modest hamlet of a few hundred people and several thousand sheep.

She applied to Cambridge University without telling her parents and was accepted. She became the first in her family -- her father and sister are deceased -- to attend college.

"It was the most exciting, vibrant time to be in developmental biology at Cambridge," she said in a soft, rounded British accent.

Temple earned a Ph.D. from University College in London and for the past 20 years has been working with neural stem cells taken from the brains of laboratory mice to try to unlock the mysteries of degenerative diseases that strike millions of Americans each year.

Temple and her researchers are currently screening drugs to gauge their effectiveness. Their hope is to use neural stem cells one day to replace nerve cells damaged in spinal injuries or in patients diagnosed with Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and other degenerative diseases of the central nervous system.

She said the MacArthur money will allow her to experiment with new avenues of research not currently funded.

"The freedom this provides to pursue new ideas is wonderful," she said. "I'm hopeful that we can begin providing better treatments for patients within the next decade."

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