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Diana Ju, Jackie Stenson, Luna Ranjit '00 awarded Grinnell social justice prize

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The recipients of the 2016 Grinnell Prize have been announced: Luna Ranjit '00, co-founder and Executive Director of Adhikaar, and Diana Jue and Jackie Stenson, co-founders of Essmart. Each winner receives \$100,000 — \$50,000 goes to the winner and \$50,000 to the organization.

The Grinnell College Innovator for Social Justice Prize is given to two recipients each year based on criteria of social justice, innovation and impact. Candidates are nominated from all over the world and through internal review and research the pool is cut down to the top 10. The selection committee hopes to extend the influence recipients of the prize have on campus by "building a little community of prize-winners here," according to Professor Christopher Hunter, Grinnell Prize Selection Committee Chair.

"[It is about] social justice work — that's a very vague phrase and we've never tried to pin it down because it has too many meanings to too many people, [as well as] innovation in the projects — and that's a little easier to deal with, we're looking for projects that may not be totally unique ... but a unique application of something ... and having impact," Hunter said.

The Grinnell Prize is about social justice, which is a multidisciplinary idea. Nominees for the prize can come from any field, as long as they are using their work to solve challenging problems in a unique way.

"We are raising the next generation of social innovators," Sanning said. "[We want to] inspire our students so they can have a vision of what they could be."

Ranjit graduated from Grinnell in 2000 and is the first alum to win the Grinnell Prize. In 2006, she was one of two recipients of the Joseph F. Wall '41 Award for Alumni Service, which helped her to jumpstart her organization. Adhikaar means "rights" in Hindi. The non-profit organization committed to helping the Nepali-speaking community in New York.

Adhikaar does advocacy work in a wide range of ways. Recently, Ranjit and the organization focused on workers in nail salons, ensuring that the fumes would not endanger their health and that their employers would not take advantage of them.

Diana Jue and Jackie Stenson cofounded Essmart, an organization that works with local street vendors in India to sustainably distribute knowledge about and access to life-improving technologies. These two women had the same passions and educational research topics and finally met to start Essmart in 2012.

Essmart is an organization that "probably doesn't sound to many as exciting," Hunter said. However, "there's a lot of organizations that create products ... but getting those to the people who need them is very hard. ... They act as that middle person — the last mile of the delivery system."

One of Program Associate Vicki Knolton's favorite things about the Grinnell Prize winners is that they often admit to having learned a lot throughout the process.

"They're brilliant," Knolton said. "But they're also willing to say, 'I didn't have all the answers from the get-go.'"



Diana Jue (left) and Jackie Stenson (right), the co-founders of Essmart, together at a local street market. Photo contributed.

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