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Eggers wins Heinz award

By Charles Storch

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Dave Eggers, an author and advocate for fresh literary voices and fledgling writers, is one of six winners of this year's \$250,000 Heinz Awards, cited for his contribution to and leadership in the arts and humanities.

Eggers, 37, who grew up in Lake Forest and is now based in San Francisco, is the youngest to have received this prominent prize, in any of its five categories, in the 13 years that Pittsburgh's Heinz Family Foundation has been bestowing them.

He is the author of the memoir "A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius" and such novels as "You Shall Know Our Velocity!" He also is the founder of McSweeney's, a book, magazine and a literary journal publisher that has become a haven for emerging and underappreciated talent.

With his book earnings, he established 826 National, a group of non-profit writing and tutoring labs for youths ages 6 to 18. It has chapters in six cities, including Chicago, with a seventh to open this fall in Boston.

"A novelist whose meteoric commercial and critical success has helped propel him into the worlds of philanthropy, advocacy and education, Dave Eggers is a true force of nature," said the foundation in announcing the no-strings awards.

In an e-mail exchange, Eggers shared credit for the Heinz with colleagues at McSweeney's and 826 National. Though McSweeney's has been having financial problems because of the bankruptcy of a distributor, he asked that his winnings go to 826 National, with the money to be split among the seven chapters.

"It'll be a huge boost, given some of the centers are really operating on a hand-to-mouth basis," he wrote.

Previous recipients of the Heinz in the arts include opera's Beverly Sills, sculptor Mark di Suvero, poet Rita

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Dove, Boys Choir of Harlem founder Walter Turnbull and playwright August Wilson.

"I don't pretend to be half the artist that, say, August Wilson was, but the award, and being in such company, definitely inspires me to do more and do it better," Eggers wrote.

He is slated to appear at the Chicago Humanities Festival Nov. 10, along with Sudanese refugee Valentino Achak Deng, who is the subject of Eggers' 2006 novel, "What Is the What."

Teresa Heinz Kerry, chairman of the foundation and the wife of U.S. Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), said Eggers and the other winners "possess an everyday kind of power that comes from a source we all can tap -- the simple willingness to share what we are good at with others who might benefit."

She has been presenting the rewards since 1994 to honor her late husband, U.S. Sen. John Heinz (R-Pa.) and recognize extraordinary contributions by Americans in areas of import to the late senator. Other categories and winners are:

* Environment (two recipients splitting \$250,000): Bernard Amadei of Boulder, Colo., founder of Engineers Without Borders, which undertakes projects in developing communities worldwide; and Susan Seacrest of Lincoln, Neb., founder of the Groundwater Foundation.

* Human condition: Dr. David Heymann of Geneva, World Health Organization assistant director general and international public-health advocate.

* Public policy: Dr. Donald Berwick of Cambridge, Mass., co-founder of the Institute for Healthcare Improvement.

* Technology, the economy and employment: Hugh Herr of Cambridge, Mass., head of Massachusetts Institute of Technology's biomechantronics lab, which develops prosthetics. Herr is a double amputee.

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