Each spring, the Judith Lee Stronach Baccalaureate Prize awards a small number of graduating seniors the extraordinary opportunity to put their ideas and their ideals into action. Granted awards of up to $25,000, recipients of the Prize dedicate themselves to going out into the world to work on socially engaged projects of their own design in the year following graduation. This month, UC Berkeley celebrates the tenth anniversary of the prestigious student Prize.

Over the past decade, the Stronach Baccalaureate Prize has been awarded to 49 Berkeley students from 27 major departments. Winning projects have taken place across the globe, from many parts of California and the US to the Caribbean, Latin America, Eastern Europe, Africa, South Asia and Oceania. As diverse as the recipients themselves, projects have addressed a range of critical social issues—including environmental justice, healthcare access, immigration, educational inequality, youth homelessness, arts education, peace and reconciliation, community development, and cultural preservation. Bob Hass, English professor and friend of Judith Stronach, remarks, "For me personally, being involved with the Stronach Prize has been a chance to see the depth and breadth of commitment and skill and vision among the Berkeley undergraduates. It's really very impressive to see that so many students have acquired in their educations gifts that they've already imagined how to put to use for the greater good."

UC Berkeley professor of Architecture Raymond Lifchez established the Stronach Baccalaureate Prize to honor the life achievements of his late wife, Judith Stronach (1943-2002). Trained in Art History, Stronach was a writer, poet, journalist and educator. She unsparingly devoted her time, energy and resources to numerous social causes, including peace and social justice, the environment, the arts, homelessness, and human rights both locally and globally. The Prize creatively carries forth her legacy of philanthropy and humane engagement in the world.

Stronach Prize recipients are selected by a distinguished panel of Berkeley faculty and community members on the basis of a project's significance, creativity, and feasibility, as well as student's preparation, experience, and motivation for undertaking the project. Architecture faculty member, Gail Brager, reflects, "Reading the Stronach Prize applications, and interviewing some of the students, has been one of the most rewarding experiences as an educator. Individually and collectively, these students represent some of the brightest, tenacious, and most dedicated young adults I've ever come across. They are role models for both young and old, and always leave me with a feeling of gratitude and hope for the future."

Since its inception, the Stronach Prize has recognized both the social impact of projects and the manner in which these projects have profoundly changed recipient’s lives. In 2007, Sun Lee, a graduate of the Interdisciplinary Studies major with a Human Rights concentration, traveled to East Timor to document the accounts of witnesses and survivors of the violence following independence from Indonesia. Her investigations into local perspectives on justice and reconciliation combined ethnography, oral history, and photography. As a culmination of her project, Sun produced a book called "Voices from East Timor: Their Histories and Visions of Justice."
Now a United States diplomat in Jerusalem, Sun reflects on her Stronach experience, “That year I developed confidence as an independent thinker, learned to probe and ask hard questions, and allowed myself to change according to the discoveries I made along the way. Being an undergrad at an institution such as Berkeley, and having had the Stronach year where I developed concrete skills and critical thinking skills has made me a better human being and contributor to the world, for which I am forever grateful.”
For 2008 recipient, Yoram Savion, receiving the Stronach Prize allowed him to dedicate himself to full-time work with Youth UpRising Center in East Oakland and San Quentin Prison. At Youth UpRising, Savion taught 13-24 years old how to create community oriented multimedia content, and at San Quentin Prison, he offered workshops in critical media and video-making. The Prize enabled him to purchase state of the art multimedia production equipment for work with all the students. After a one video of Yoram’s collaboration with local street dancers in East Oakland went viral, he and one of his students, Kash Gaines, launched YAK films, a production company dedicated to bringing quality, community focused multimedia, to an increasingly global audience.

Thinking back on the project’s early success, Yoram says, “Within a year, we were moving to Paris, then New York and working full time for our own company! Since then… we’ve collaborated with the best street dancers and musicians to create YouTube videos that have generated over 200,000,000 views and over half a million subscribers. Winning the Stronach Prize has had an immeasurable impact on my professional and personal development. It changed my life. This year, I moved back to Oakland and plan to start teaching again. Many of the problems I observed in our community during my Stronach, are still very much a reality today, and the unique skills I have developed are more relevant than ever for today’s youth. So, in a way, my Stronach project is still ongoing.”

Stronach Prize Alumnus Yoram Savion with collaborator Kash Gaines, Oakland, 2008.
For Maya Weir, Peace and Conflict Studies major and 2013 recipient, the Stronach enabled her to carry forth her dream of increasing access to yoga in communities marginalized by race, class and mental health status. Having directly experienced the restorative power of yoga following an illness in her family, Weir started the Community Yoga Project. For two years she partnered with several social justice organizations in the East Bay to offer accessible yoga classes. According to Maya, “The Stronach Prize provided me with a platform to do exactly what I wanted and the benefits were enormous. In the process of creating access to yoga for marginalized populations, I learned so much about service, society, myself, energy, holding space for others, yoga, illness, mental health, homelessness, history, trauma, intergenerational trauma and more. I am now starting my graduate degree in clinical psychology and hope to integrate yoga with therapy. The Stronach prize allowed me to build my yoga/facilitation skills and gave me a framework for access that I will continue to build on.”

"Going slow, to me, it feels like I’m floating. It feels wonderful...It calms you down and it blows all the bad energy out of you."

-Clinique Johnson,
CYP Participant
You can read more about each of the Stronach Baccalarueate Prize recipients, including a full archive of their project updates from the field, on the program website. The Stronach Baccalaureate Prize is administered by the Office of Undergraduate Research and Scholarships, in the College of Letters and Science. The deadline for the 2016 Prize is Tuesday, March 1, 2016. For more information about the application process and upcoming information sessions, please see the program website. To make an appointment with the program advisor, please email stronachbaccprize@berkeley.edu.