



Opus Prize Encounters: Moral Exemplars and Unsung Heroes

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This is an unpublished conference paper for the 14th Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 8th – Saturday 10th January 2026.

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Abstract

The annual Opus Prize awards (US\$1.2 million) recognize the work and commitments of faith-based, unsung heroes who use innovative ideas and entrepreneurial mindsets to address persisting social challenges within their communities. Through a unique model, the Opus Prize Foundation collaborates with a different university partner each year, involving students and faculty in the process as ambassadors who visit the communities of the finalists for that year's awards. This research explores the influence on student ambassadors of meeting the finalists during the site visits and witnessing first-hand their commitments in service to their communities.

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History of the Opus Prize

The Opus Prize Foundation (OPF) of Minnetonka, Minnesota, USA is a family foundation that was established in 2004. Since its conception, the OPF seeks to identify faith-based, unsung heroes who use innovative ideas and entrepreneurial mindsets to address some of the persisting social challenges within their communities. Informally, the vision of the Opus Prize is to help identify and illuminate the works of individuals and organizations that are in the model of being the next Mother Teresa.

Through a unique model, the OPF selects a different Catholic university each year to be its partner for a commitment of about 18 months. The partner university is asked to utilize its networks of graduates, friends of the university, and friends-of-friends of the university to participate in a confidential nomination process as “spotters” to suggest to the university individuals and organizations, anywhere in the world, that match the values of the OPF and the selection criteria for the annual Opus Prize awards.

The six values of the Opus Prize Foundation are: (1) social entrepreneurship, (2) transformational leadership, (3) sustainable change, (4) faith, (5) unsung heroes, and (6) life of service (Opus Prize, n.d., “Our Values”).

At the conclusion of the confidential nomination process, the partner university convenes a jury of thought leaders and trusted collaborators from their community to select from the pool of nominees three organizations as “finalists” for that year’s Opus Prize awards.

Concurrently with this external process to gather nominations and to select three finalists, the partner university runs an internal program to select students, faculty, and staff members who will serve as ambassadors. The partner university forms three delegations of ambassadors, each of which includes two students and one faculty/staff member.

With members of the Board of Directors for the OPF, these delegations of university ambassadors travel to the communities of the finalists for due diligence site visits. Each of the three delegations makes one site visit to the community of one of the three finalists. These are opportunities to meet the finalists and members of their communities, to explore the deep texture in which the finalists' works are embedded, to see what a life of service looks like, to see faith as a verb, and to see faith in action.

Following the site visits, all ambassadors are asked to write reflections about their experiences and to share these with the Executive Director of the OPF. These reflections are woven into reports about the site visits and the works of the finalists. Separately from the partner university, the Board of Directors for the OPF meets and selects one of the three finalists to be that year's Opus Prize "Laureate." This decision is not immediately shared publicly.

To end the year of the Opus Prize, the partner university hosts Opus Prize Week on its campus as a series of visits to classes, panel discussions, engagements with students, and public conversations. Ambassadors are often featured in speaking opportunities, as they can reflect publicly upon their experiences and visits to the communities of the finalists. The week culminates with a celebration and a public announcement of the Laureate. The organization of the Laureate receives a grant of US\$1 million. Each of the other two finalists' organizations receives a grant of US\$100,000.

At various stages of the arc of the Opus Prize commitments, members of the university community are invited and encouraged to reflect upon the questions “Who are unsung heroes who inspire me? Whose stories and impacts would I share with broader audiences? Who would I nominate for the Opus Prize? What is a social cause to which I would give US\$1 million?” Asking these types of questions are common responses that many individuals have when they first hear and learn about the Opus Prize. This is part of the intentional design in choosing to work in close collaboration with and through university partners. “The Opus Prize is awarded on college campuses, providing an opportunity to inspire a new generation of leaders. Through identifying Opus Prize finalists, students build meaningful connections, experience personal transformation and are challenged to live lives of service” (Opus Prize, n.d., “About”).

Opus Prize Due Diligence Site Visits

Central to the university’s partnership with the OPF are the site visit experiences that the university ambassadors make to the communities of the finalists. Past ambassadors have shared that these include rare, sometimes vulnerable, conversations with the finalists and individuals from the communities the finalists’ organizations serve. The memories from these conversations often endure beyond the 3-4 days of the site visit experiences (McGinty, 2019).

At the heart of the site visit experiences are three key words that were central to Pope Francis’ papacy—encounter, accompaniment, and dialogue (Francis, 2016; Francis, 2023).

The site visits are deeply textured encounters for the ambassadors to meet—in the persons who are the finalists—individuals who fit the ideals of the faith-based, unsung heroes that the OPF seeks to find. During the site visits, ambassadors hear the origin stories of finalists’ organizations and learn about the moments and decisions that led the finalists to commit themselves to their vocational spaces.

Through the high-impact practice of making site visits, the ambassadors have opportunities to learn about the personal and organizational struggles and challenges that lives of service may require. This follows Vaccarezza & Niccoli's (2019) encouragement that "...Educators should do their best to show that exemplary people have become what they are by walking a long and often tormented path, and their moral qualities are far from inborn" (p. 341). Finalists share with ambassadors many of the systemic and structural challenges that their organizations face, as well as sharing their personal origin stories, the founding and early days of their organizations, and the texture and cultures of communities in which they are embedded.

Previous research with Opus Prize student ambassadors captured ambassadors' amazement at the joy and optimism that many finalists exude, in spite of the daily and regular challenges that their organizations may face in fulfilling their missions and visions (McGinty, 2019). While the finalists are not held up and identified as *moral saints*, following Wolf's (1982) definition, the Opus Prize finalists and the other-centered nature of their work commitments likely meet the definition. "The happiness of the moral saint, then, would lie in the happiness of others, and so he would devote himself to others gladly, and with a whole and open heart" (Wolf, 1982, p. 420). Opus Prize finalists have committed their skills and vocations to pursue unique solutions to the challenges that their neighborhoods and communities face.

Encounters with Finalists for the Opus Prize Awards

Viewed through the lenses of the values of the OPF (social entrepreneurship, transformational leadership, sustainable change, faith, unsung heroes, and life of service), how do student ambassadors understand these encounters with the finalists and their communities? The intentional inclusion of site visits is to create space for sharing stories, for learning about the

lives of those who are serving and being served, and for considering different answers to the question *Who is my neighbor?*

The OPF is eager to illuminate the work of “unsung heroes”—individuals and organizations whose stories are under-told or perhaps not well publicized beyond their communities or regions. The very nature of shining this spotlight on the finalists brings additional attention to them and their works. Their stories caught the attention and must have inspired the “spotters” who nominated the finalists to the universities. The spotters admired the work and commitments of the organization and felt compelled to complete the lengthy nomination forms. From among the many worthy nominations that the partner university received and that were given to the jury for consideration, the finalists were so admired that they percolated up through the deliberation process and became one of the three finalists for that year’s Opus Prize awards. The transitive nature of this admiration extends from the spotters to the jury, and it continues with even deeper texture for the ambassadors who make the site visits. “When we consider typical instances of admiration like our admiration for saints or heroes, film stars, or great works of art or literature, these all involve an approval of the person or object being admired. Approval then seems to be a core feature of prototypical cases of admiration” (Archer, 2019, p. 145). Even before ambassadors embark on their site visits to have in-person encounters, the finalists are admired by those who have read and learned about them.

Ambassadors are occasionally star-struck when they first meet the finalists. The ambassadors have read about the finalists, and they know that the Opus Prize jury selected the finalist from among many, other worthy nominees. The experience of the OPF is that finalists enjoy having eager and curious university students visit them and their communities. The finalists become very easy to relate to and are eager to engage with the ambassadors. They want

to exchange stories. “In addition to attainability, relevance is another factor influencing the motivational effect of exemplars. Irrelevant exemplars, particularly historic figures, cannot effectively promote students’ prosocial motivation and make them emulate the presented exemplars. Although students usually say that the heart-touching stories of Mother Teresa and Nelson Mandela are wonderful, they might ask, ‘So what?’” (Han, Kim, Jeong, & Cohen, 2017, p. 3). Finalists for the Opus Prize are often eager to show and share what they are busy doing.

In advance of the site visits, ambassadors are given copies of the nominations for the Opus Prize that were submitted to the university. Ambassadors have the opportunity to read about the finalists and to learn about the particular social issue(s) that their organizations are addressing. Ambassadors have reflected that there is a stark difference from merely reading about someone in comparison to meeting, speaking, sharing meals, and sharing bus rides with the finalists during the 3-4 days of the site visits. While not explicitly designed for this purpose, the Opus Prize site visits are dynamic experiences for university students to meet individuals they may subsequently identify as moral exemplars. The work of the finalists may be inspiring; the finalists themselves may be worthy of admiration.

Through the machinations of the cycle of the Opus Prize, ambassadors have textured encounters with the finalists in their work and community settings. Upon their returns home, ambassadors are asked to write reflections from their site visit experiences and time with the finalists. Beyond the commitments with their university, limited research has been conducted to explore what happens after the Opus Prize (McGinty, 2019). Admiration and approval can be passive; reflections can be limited to the time and place of recollecting. What influence do finalists have on student ambassadors after the conclusion of the official Opus Prize commitments?

Reflections from Former Opus Prize Student Ambassadors

This research explores former ambassadors' perceptions and reflections of finalists for the Opus Prize awards. 16 former student ambassadors shared their reflections and memories of encounters with finalists. These former ambassadors participated in site visits between the years 2012-2025. These ambassadors represent six different universities and years of the Opus Prize. As university students, they studied a wide variety of major courses—including public health and marketing, mathematics and Master of Divinity, finance and philosophy, engineering and education. Six of the respondents are male; 10 respondents are female.

Through surveys, ambassadors were asked (1) to share a memory of the finalist from their site visit experience, (2) to share one word or a short phrase to describe the finalist, (3) to identify a character attribute that the finalist possesses and which the ambassador has incorporated into her/his life commitments, and (4) to identify a character attribute that the finalist possesses and which the ambassadors aspires to incorporate into her/his future life commitments. The tables on the following pages include former student ambassadors' responses to the second, third, and fourth prompts, respectively.

Table 1

One Word or Short Phrase Ambassadors Use to Describe Finalist for the Opus Prize Awards

Angel

Compassion

Deeply relational

Dignity

Encouragement

Flourishing

Genuine, headstrong, passionate

Listening

Loving

Radiates joy

Resourceful and resilient

Saintly

Selfless changemaker, rooted in faith and community

Transformative

With

"You are loved; go love other people."

Table 2

Character Attribute(s) of the Finalist that the Ambassador Has Incorporated into Her/His Life Commitments

Gratefulness and optimism

Honor the dignity of every person

Intertwining faith and culture

Listening deeply to the needs of the present moment

Opening my heart to be moved with compassion and empathy

Seeking to radiate hope and joy

Servant leadership

To be genuine and not to be performative

To encourage others to journey down the path with me

To focus on the dignity of every individual

To fully release my fears and worries, trust God, and use what I have

To lead with compassion and to withhold judgment

To lead with heart

To respond to what God sets on the path

To seek to bring Christ to the forgotten corners of our nation

Willingness to collaborate with others to work for the common good, and humility in approaching major issues—always aware that a community is needed to help do the work

Table 3

Character Attribute(s) of the Finalist that the Ambassador Aspires to Incorporate into Her/His Future Life Commitments

Aspire to make this world a more just and humane place

Do not be afraid to share my story

Learning to share with integrity and honesty and not to hide or be ashamed

My openness to continuous learning

Remembering to give people places in society where they are seen, heard, and valued

Sincere humility; to allow God to love through (oneself), not counting the costs

To be a positive example of what is achievable

To be as free in my ability to love the people before me, rather than try and force my agenda onto a situation

To be more philanthropic and to get involved

To combine compassion with courage

To give back more in service

To learn how better to read the signs of the times

To learn not to let limited resources limit my vision and commitment

To listen deeply, to embrace others without conditions

To possess (the finalist's) infectious joy and generosity of spirit

To walk alongside people through crisis to stability, healing the whole person: mind, body, spirit

Discussion of Former Student Ambassadors' Reflections

Student ambassadors are prepared and primed to encounter “faith-based, unsung heroes” when they participate as members of Opus Prize site visit delegations. Often students self-select into the pool of students that universities draw upon to determine which students will serve as Opus Prize ambassadors. Those students who are selected as ambassadors are informed that they are not participating in an alternative spring break program or service-learning experience. Opus

Prize site visits are framed as opportunities to encounter individuals and communities who have already been pre-selected by the Opus Prize jury as inspiring and admirable organizations. Even with these filters that are engineered into the protocol of the Opus Prize selection process, the descriptions and characteristics that former ambassadors used in their reflections of the finalists are remarkably prosocial and positive. The finalists are generally not viewed as perfect or otherworldly (“angel” and “saintly,” excepted), but rather as individuals who are forces for good within their communities. As moral exemplars, they are worthy of admiration and approval for the work they are doing (Archer, 2019).

Two themes emerge from the personal characteristics that former ambassadors identified as having been incorporated into the commitments, as well as characteristics that they aspire to incorporate into their future commitments. The first is that all the characteristics that were witnessed in the finalists have an *other*-centeredness that serves as the focus. These already-incorporated characteristics and aspire-to-incorporate characteristics include actions and dispositions that extend from this self-less center and point towards a commitment to focus on the lives and wellness of others. The Opus Prize finalists move the objects of our attention and pursuits. In addition to the first move to look beyond a focus of I/me/mine, they direct us also to move beyond the focus on you/you/yours. The former ambassadors reflect that the finalists are pointing toward a focus on we/us/ours. The focus for the finalists is on community. The ambassadors understood this.

The second theme that emerges from the former ambassadors’ reflections on the inspiration that they still draw on from witnessing the finalists in action is a desire to cultivate an emotional and dispositional openness to life, to others, and to future possibilities. Ambassadors shared that they witnessed—in the persons of the finalists—individuals who have shown them

that there is another (better) way to be and to be in relationship with others. Ambassadors aspire to listen differently, to share more freely, and to engage more completely. The finalists are pointing toward a different kind of a life.

The Opus Prize in 2025

The 2025 Opus Prize awards were hosted in partnership with Xavier University of Louisiana (XULA) in New Orleans, USA. This marked the twentieth year that the Opus Prize Foundation has shined a spotlight on and supported the works of faith-based, unsung heroes who are using innovative tactics and entrepreneurial mindsets to address some of the persisting social challenges within their communities. A list of the past university partners is included as an appendix. The unique model for an annual partnership with a university and its networks yields additional benefits, as it engages many different individuals and communities: those who serve as spotters and write nominations about inspiring organizations for the university to consider; the members of the jury who deliberate and decide upon the three finalists from among the many, worthy nominees; the university's student/faculty/staff ambassadors who travel to meet the finalists and their communities; the partner university's campus collaborators who plan and extend hospitality to the finalists during Opus Prize Week; and the Board of Directors for the OPF who maintain the vision and structure for this dynamic initiative.

Throughout the partnership for the 2025 Opus Prize, the leadership team and entire community at XULA affirmed and reaffirmed their commitment to "Promoting a more just and humane society" (Xavier University of Louisiana, n.d., "The Full Story"). Participating as the partner university for the commitments and celebrations of the 2025 Opus Prize was an additional pathway for XULA and its students to engage thoughtfully with the modern world, to learn about deeply entrenched social challenges, and to encounter dynamic organizations that are

seeking to effect positive changes. In the finalists that they identified, the XULA community encountered moral exemplars who have committed their lives to promote a more just and humane street/neighborhood/city/world.

The three finalists for the 2025 Opus Prize awards were the Religious Sisters of the Holy Spirit of Mazabuka, Zambia (led by Sr. Rosalia Sakayombo and Sr. Juunza Mwangani), the African Caribbean Community Initiative of Wolverhampton, England (led by Alicia Spence), and Micah Ecumenical Ministries of Fredericksburg, Virginia, USA (led by Meghann Cotter).

Sr. Rosalia, Sr. Juunza, Alicia, and Meghann are the most recent moral exemplars who are parts of the story of the Opus Prize Foundation. As they work with the women and men, the youth and children in their communities, they point toward a more hope-filled future. They remind us that hope has the power to heal, and hope has the power to hold us together.

The Opus Prize Foundation is honored to include these four leaders and their inspiring organizations among the stories and the legacy of the Foundation's commitment to illuminate the works of those who point us toward a better way to be and a better way to be together.

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Appendix

History of University Partners for the Opus Prize Awards

- 2004 University of San Francisco (San Francisco, California)
- 2005 Marquette University (Milwaukee, Wisconsin)
- 2006 University of Notre Dame (Notre Dame, Indiana)
- 2007 Catholic University of America (Washington, D.C.)
- 2008 Seattle University (Seattle, Washington)
- 2009 University of St. Thomas (St. Paul, Minnesota)
- 2010 Fordham University (Bronx, New York)
- 2011 Loyola Marymount University (Los Angeles, California)
- 2012 St. Catherine University (St. Paul, Minnesota)
- 2013 Georgetown University (Washington, D.C.)
- 2014 Gonzaga University (Spokane, Washington)

- 2016 Creighton University (Omaha, Nebraska)
- 2017 Regis University (Denver, Colorado)
- 2018 University of Portland (Portland, Oregon)
- 2019 St. Louis University (St. Louis, Missouri)

- 2021 Loyola University Chicago (Chicago, Illinois)
- 2022 Catholic University of America (Washington, D.C.)
- 2023 Villanova University (Villanova, Pennsylvania)
- 2024 Santa Clara University (Santa Clara, California)
- 2025 Xavier University of Louisiana (New Orleans, Louisiana)
- 2026 DePaul University (Chicago, Illinois)