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Foundation Honors Social Activists

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The Los Angeles-based Gleitsman Foundation recognized two social activists for their work in social justice in a ceremony held at the Kennedy School of Government (KSG) last night.

Alan L. Gleitsman, who established the foundation, called this year's honorees – actor and human rights advocate Mike Farrell and self-help residential center founder Mimi Silbert – “Citizens extraordinaire.”

“The one and only purpose of this award is to recognize activists and motivate others to activism,” he said.

Farrell, best known for portraying Captain B.J. Hunnicutt on “M*A*S*H,” Currently Plays Dr. James Hansen on NBC’s “Providence” and serves as the vice president of the Screen Actors Guild.

He is also president of the Death Penalty Focus of California, a public education organization.

“It’s our job to make [people] uncomfortable,” Farrell said of his activism against capital punishment.

In his acceptance speech, Farrell acknowledged that he was in an “odd position.” By virtue of his profession, he said, “goodies” were thrown his way. “[But] because of where my heart is, this means more than anything else,” he told the audience. “John F. Kennedy [Jr., ‘40] was and remains an inspiring figure to me. The fact that the award is being presented in the Kennedy School moves me more than would be expected.”

Silbert, the co-founder, president, chair and CEO of the Delancey Street Foundation, a San Francisco self-help residential facility for drug addicts, prostitutes, felons, and other prisoners, told the audience she was a mere “pass-through.”

Gesturing widely with her arms, Silbert said, “I’m thrilled. And I think I can allow myself to be that level of thrilled because, truthfully, I don’t accept this for myself. I’m accepting an award for the people who are considered the losers of society.”

Silbert told The Crimson that for 31 years, she has referred to the Delancey Street Foundation, named for the New York street her parents lived on, as the “Harvard of the underclass.”

On introducing Silbert, Gleitsman told the audience that she liked to say that while Harvard took the top one to two percent, Delancey Street picked the bottom one to two percent.

But Silbert proudly said that her program boasts more than 15,000 success stories.

“The secret,” Silbert said, “is that there is no secret. It’s run completely by the people who are the problem. We have no staff and no funding. Everyone is staff.”

Silbert and Farrell each received custom-made sculptures by Maya Lin, the creator of the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C. The sculptures feature a magnifying glass in the center.

Gleitsman said that when he commissioned Lin to craft the awards, she was inspired by the idea that “some extraordinary people can see things more clearly than others – as if they were magnified.”

Silbert and Farrell also share a \$100,000 prize.