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O'Brien: Can we take the Tech Awards to the next level?

By **Chris O'Brien**
Mercury News
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I've been feeling particularly grim and cynical about the economy and technology. **Blog**
So spending a recent evening at the Tech Awards was just the antidote I needed. [Chris O'Brien's blog](#)

Produced by the Tech Museum of Innovation, this marked the eighth year the awards honored five innovative projects in the categories of the environment, economic development, education, equality and health.

I've lived in the Bay Area for nine years now, but this was the first time I managed to attend. And for the life of me, I can't recall why I hadn't made this a priority before.

The prizes were awarded at a black-tie dinner held Nov. 13 at the San Jose McEnery Convention Center that drew 1,400 folks. I'm glad I decided to throw on my ill-fitting monkey suit to join them.

But as the evening progressed, I had more than a dozen people make the same comment to me about the \$50,000 cash prize bestowed on the winners, "Is that it?"

After hearing about these remarkably inspiring projects, the number feels underwhelming. Whether you think it's fair or not, money gets people's attention.

So the best way for the Tech Awards to be recognized by people outside Silicon Valley and the high-tech industry, and to have a greater impact on the projects, is to dramatically increase the amount of the prize.

Let's start with a couple of quick comparisons. The MacArthur Fellows Program, the so-called "genius grants," hands out \$500,000 to between 20 and 40 winners each year. The

Nobel Foundation awarded about \$1.2 million for winners in each category this year.

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That's quite a gap. To better understand how the Tech Awards worked, I spent some time chatting on the phone with Lee Wilkerson, executive director of the program.

By way of background, the awards were originally conceived as a fundraiser for The Tech. While the awards program and dinner have continued to grow in size and prestige, the awards have never really generated much in the way of funds for the museum, which has experienced its own financial ups and downs since opening. But that's another column.

Wilkerson explained that each year, the awards staff works with a number of partners around the world to identify nominees. Five finalists are chosen in each category, and they are flown in to spend a week in Silicon Valley. During that time, they get public speaking coaching and fundraising advice, and are introduced to venture capitalists, philanthropists and

other potential sources of funding.

The gala is the culmination of that week. One laureate from each category is selected to receive the \$50,000 cash prize. Applied Materials sponsors the event, and each category has a benefactor who makes a rather sizable donation that includes the money for the cash prize. Wilkerson wouldn't disclose the event's budget, or other financial matters.

"Although all of us would love to see a higher cash prize, the reality is that our laureates place a tremendous value on the connections they make and the attention they get for being laureates," Wilkerson said.

One other caveat: That \$50,000 goes a long way in some of the places where these projects are based. For instance, the winner of the Microsoft Education Award this year was the Digital Study Hall, a project based in Lucknow, India, that introduces DVDs made by skilled teachers into some of the poorest classrooms across India and Bangladesh. The

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organization's annual budget is \$100,000.

"Digital Study Hall views the cash prize as significant," spokesman Randolph Wang wrote in an e-mail.

OK, so there's more to the Tech Awards than the cash prize. Still, this is Silicon Valley. And if the Tech Awards really want to become the Nobel Prizes of Technology, as they unofficially call themselves, that number will have to be higher.

Wilkerson doesn't necessarily disagree. The Tech Awards had planned to launch an endowment drive in 2009 to double the cash prize.

But the economy is forcing it to re-evaluate whether it's the right time to launch such a campaign. It's a tough decision. And for a change, I'm genuinely torn between arguing for supporting this inspiring program and wondering whether this needs to take a back seat to more urgent matters.

So I want to hear from you, Silicon Valley. Is there enough support for such a campaign? Or do other priorities make it a better idea to shelve it until the economy gets back on its feet?

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