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A statue of Baltimore Archbishop John Carroll — founder of Georgetown University — is seen o

A statue of Baltimore Archbishop John Carroll — founder of Georgetown University — is seen on the Jesuit-run school's Washington campus March 3, 2022. (CNS/Chaz Muth)

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The inaugural recipients have been selected for Georgetown University's new Reconciliation Fund, meant to support programs benefiting descendants of those once enslaved by Jesuits in Maryland. The first round of semester-based payouts, announced on April 28, total $200,000.

The five projects are based in Maryland and Louisiana, the latter being where 272 enslaved African Americans were infamously sold in 1838 to shore up the finances at Georgetown, the nation's first Catholic university. They include a housing nonprofit, mental health services, descendant community outreach initiatives, and youth educational programs.

"The Reconciliation Fund is a collective effort — an example of our community's deep commitment to the possibilities that can emerge when we work in partnership to advance Reconciliation," said Georgetown's president, John DeGioia.

"We are honored to recognize these inaugural recipients and are deeply grateful for their meaningful and important work to advance equity and justice."

The Reconciliation Fund, inspired by a Georgetown student referendum in 2019 that aimed to charge a $27.20 annual tuition fee to support a similar initiative, was first announced in October 2022, almost two years after university administrators committed to financially supporting descendant communities. The school faced criticism for rejecting the nonbinding referendum, and the later announcement of a Descendants Truth and Reconciliation Foundation — run in part by the Jesuits — only increased demands for more direct support from the university coffers.

Though the school, through its representatives, said that the Reconciliation Fund would be supported by alumni (rather than student) support, the fund's website directs prospective donors to a page with no such restrictions. More than 500 alumni had donated to the fund by November 2022.

At the time of the fund's announcement last year, the school noted that recipients of the fund could include "health and legal clinics, environmental justice projects, after-school and pre-college programs and local history and memorialization projects."

The organizations selected earlier this year largely fit into that framework.

One of them, the Southern Maryland Descendant Gatherings, will organize memorial trips among descendants to the lands where their ancestors were once enslaved near Washington, D.C. The group, led by descendants themselves, will also work with the GU272 Descendants Association to locate others who are not yet connected to the community.

"We are building the future that our ancestors envisioned," said Henrietta Pike, chairperson of the Southern Maryland Descendant Gatherings committee. "This project will help us pass on our rich legacy of family and faith. We appreciate the investment in this outreach project to connect and expand the descendant community."

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Two other descendant-led Reconciliation Fund recipients are located in Maringouin, Louisiana, the primary city where the GU272 were sold to in the late 19th century. Many descendants remain in the virtually all-Black town of roughly 900. The Starting with Day 1 Building Confident Kids project will provide educational programming for local elementary and middle school students, while Mon Petit Maringouin will offer virtual tutors and mentors from among Georgetown students for high schoolers.

Two other projects, Healing Minds NOLA and Youth Rebuilding New Orleans, existed prior to the fund's creation and are not led by descendants. It is also not immediately clear how they specifically benefit descendants. Even so, it is known that some reside in the Crescent City, per media reports.

Leo Baker, a member of the Descendant Advisory Committee that helped select the recipients, said that the Reconciliation Fund marks a major step in connecting descendants to Georgetown for the purpose of generational healing — a journey that became a subject of international interest in the mid-2010s.

"In the wake of the anniversary of Georgetown University's public admission, acknowledgement and acceptance of its history owed in part to the GU272 — although I still believe so much work and trust-building is before us — I applaud this initial funding moment," said Baker.

"It is a win for those who commit toward reconciliation and restorative justice, especially with a collective input from both students and descendants in the spirit of 'for us, about us and by us.' "

The university says that the Reconciliation Fund will continue to select recipients twice a year, and applications for the next round are expected to open soon. Interested parties can sign up for notifications here, and find more information about the fund on the dedicated university webpage.

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