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Peter Laugharn, president and CEO, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, from left, Linda Hilton, chai

Peter Laugharn, president and CEO, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, from left, Linda Hilton, chair of the board, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, Mitch Anderson, executive director and co-founder, Amazon Frontlines, Nemonte Nenquimo, co-founder, Amazon Frontlines, Daime and actor and environmentalist Leonardo DiCaprio at the 2024 Hilton Humanitarian Prize Ceremony honoring Amazon Frontlines at The Beverly Hilton, Wednesday, Oct. 9, 2024 in Beverly Hills, Calif. (Jordan Strauss/AP Content Services for Conrad N. Hilton Foundation)



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In a day recognizing both the gravity of climate change and celebrating humanity's ability to overcome challenges through confidence and hope, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation awarded its Hilton Humanitarian Prize for the first time to a South American Indigenous organization.

Amazon Frontlines, founded in 2011 and which works on conservation and climate activism in the Upper Amazon, was chosen specifically because its efforts focus on "protecting the Amazon rainforest, which is essentially the lungs of the planet," said Peter Laugharn, the foundation's president and CEO during an all-day humanitarian

symposium and prize ceremony held Oct. 9 at the Beverly Hilton Hotel.

In accepting the $2.5 million award — the world's largest humanitarian prize — the co-founders of the group said the honor affirms their work and recognizes their struggles in the Amazon region.

The Hilton prize "acknowledges us and helps us shine light on our work and the work of our ancestors to protect our land and the environment," said co-founder Nemonte Nenquimo, a leader of the Waorani people. "The prize will help us continue to protect the Amazon and our land from the outside world."

She added that Indigenous peoples and climate activists are reminding others in the human family that "Mother Earth is waking us up. We need to listen to her."

Mitch Anderson, Amazon Frontlines' co-founder and executive director, called the prize "a recognition and a validation of the leadership of Indigenous peoples on the climate crisis."

"[The honor is] a validation of all the struggles of Indigenous women, of youth and of elders to protect the most biodiverse forest on the planet, to protect their homes and protect the planet's climate," he said in accepting the award.



Amazon Frontlines co-founder Mitch Anderson, left, speaks with Siekopai leader and partner Justino Piaguaje in Siekopai ancestral territory on the border between Peru and Ecuador in the Amazon basin. Amazon Frontlines won the $2.5 million Hilton Humanitarian Prize from the the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. (Amazon Frontlines/Christopher Fragapane)

The Hilton Foundation highlighted Amazon Frontlines' focus on "permanently protecting the rainforest homelands of dozens of Indigenous nations from further mining, drilling and deforestation using grassroots organizing, advocacy, legal defense and cutting-edge technology like GPS mapping and drone and camera trap surveillance."

It has done this, the foundation said, by partnering with Indigenous peoples to win notable and significant climate victories in recent times. These include the A'i Cofán and Waorani peoples' success in establishing legal precedents for Indigenous rights

in the Amazon region and in protecting hundreds of thousands of acres of rainforest.

The group, headquartered in Lago Agrio, Ecuador, but which also has U.S. offices in San Francisco, led a successful 2023 referendum to indefinitely stop oil drilling in Ecuador's Yasuni National Park — one of the planet's most biodiverse territories.

Anderson said the consequences of the rain forest's continued destruction — through deforestation, mining and other extractive industries — would prove dire for humanity and the entire planet.

"If the Amazon rainforest falls, if the Amazon rainforest approaches a tipping point or can no longer sustain itself and can no longer produce its own rain," he said, "then there's no chance of stopping the climate crisis."

A February 2023 article in Scientific American described how the "sheer size" of the Amazon — roughly on par with Australia — means "everything the forest 'does' is big and impactful" with climate change. Among other things, the biome is a "natural climate protector" as one of the world's largest carbon sinks, absorbing and storing heat-trapping greenhouse gas emissions throughout its massive rainforest.



A view of the Amazon rainforest at Yasuni National Park is seen July 29, 2023, during a tour led by Indigenous Waorani people in the Pastaza province of Ecuador. On Aug. 21, 23. voters passed a referendum to prohibit oil drilling in the Waorani's protected territory. Amazon Frontlines supported the referendum. (OSV News/Reuters/Karen Toro)

Asked by EarthBeat what winning the prize means for Amazon Frontlines, Anderson said in an email it is a recognition of a deliberate strategy of "deep partnership between Indigenous movements and Western activists on the frontlines working together to strengthen Indigenous autonomy and protect the Amazon rainforest and our planet's climate."

Primarily living and working in the Amazon rainforest allows the organization to collaborate with Indigenous nations and organizations in their home territories, he said. "We believe the solutions to the global climate crisis must emerge from and respect the frontline communities living in the places most impacted by climate change," he said

The Hilton honor comes at a time of both increased risks and crises, as well as "direct threats" to Indigenous peoples defending their lands, Anderson said.

The prize money will help Amazon Frontlines "build momentum" to expand its work across the Upper Amazon, he said, including by funding healing retreats for Indigenous leaders (particularly for women), and other programs to help its team sustain the energy needed to do such work long term. It also plans to purchase land to build an organizing center in the Ecuadorian Amazon.

While Amazon Frontlines does not currently work with Catholic groups — which have a long history of activism in the Amazon, including by women religious — Anderson said "we know that we share [with members of the Catholic Church] a commitment to community service in grassroots support and mobilizing, and empathy and care for all."

One of the jurors selecting this year's prize winner was Sr. Joyce Meyer, a member of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary and international liaison to women religious for Global Sisters Report who has longtime ties to the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. (The foundation is a major funder of Global Sisters Report.)

Meyer said Amazon Frontlines was easily her first choice as a juror, partly because it was "so important to have an Indigenous group recognized. Their courage and persistence in taking on government and multinationals is totally amazing."

Meyer added that having a woman (Nenquimo) as one of the group's leaders is "fantastic."

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> —Mitch Anderson
>
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The enthusiasm that greeted Nenquimo and Anderson from symposium participants — many themselves representatives of humanitarian groups — was palpable. So was a warm welcome to an unexpected speaker: actor and environmental activist Leonardo DiCaprio, who introduced the Amazon Frontlines leaders.

The spirit of the day was set early by Jesuit Fr. Gregory Boyle, founder of Homeboy Industries, a Los Angeles-based youth program helping at-risk young people and former gang members through resources like employment opportunities, counseling and legal services.

In opening remarks for the symposium, whose theme was "A Way Forward," Boyle contemplated those moments when people of disparate life experiences "discover we are kin" — something "we long for as human beings."

Boyle's ministry with gang members has taught him that "systems change when people change" and that happens "when people are cherished."

During a panel discussion on "human-centered change" on community health workers in Africa and Haiti, Margaret Osielo Odera, a promoter of community health programs with the Kenyan Ministry of Health, spoke of her own experience of being cherished.

More than a decade ago, Odera struggled with HIV infection. But the intervention of a community health worker helped her regain her health and life and inspired Odera to become involved in grass-roots efforts strengthening medical services in Kenya.

"She changed my life," Odera said.

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Loung Ung, a Cambodian-American writer and activist, lost family during the Cambodian genocide of the mid- to late-1970s. Not wanting to give in to hatred, Ung dreamt "that there was a way forward … a way out of hate."

After arriving in the United States, Ung came to realize that "peace is not a wish," but rooted in concrete action committed by those who wish to see and create a better world.

Ung offered a counter to the oft-heard cynical news dictum around stories of violence and horror — "If it bleeds, it leads" — with her own twist: "If it is awesome, let it blossom."

Summing up the day's symposium, Hilton's Laugharn reiterated Ung's theme alongside the power of storytelling as humanity goes forward in the coming years to grapple with climate change and other enormous challenges.

"Do you have the 'story energy' to do the work you do?" Laugharn asked the assembled humanitarians, adding he hopes the recognition the Hilton Humanitarian Prize affords can help humanity "to stop, to listen, to rethink the course we're on."

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