

UW psychologist Kristina Olson thought the MacArthur Foundation had the wrong ‘genius’

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The word “genius” makes Kristina Olson squirm.

When the MacArthur Foundation rang last year to tell her she’d won one of its coveted [fellowships](#) — colloquially called genius grants — the University of Washington psychologist figured it was a mistake.

“Are you sure you have the right Kristina Olson?” she asked.

Even though the caller ticked off items on Olson’s résumé, including her groundbreaking research on transgender children, it was weeks before she was convinced it wasn’t all an elaborate prank.

Olson still won’t mention the prize unless pressed. Where she comes from, in central Illinois, boasting is almost as inexcusable as not being nice. “Talking about myself is my least favorite subject,” she says — and she really means it.

But it’s been a remarkable run for the 38-year-old researcher. A few months before Olson found out about the \$625,000 MacArthur fellowship, she won the [Alan T. Waterman Award](#), the National Science Foundation’s highest honor for early-career scientists. Olson was the first psychologist, and the first woman in 14 years, to win the prize and the \$1 million grant that comes with it.