

What happens when you invest
in women who use drugs?

Learnings from the Jude Byrne Emerging Female Leader Award



What happens when you invest in women who use drugs? Learnings from the Jude Byrne Emerging Female Leader Award

"This award meant so much in my life — it helped me keep going at a time when I was questioning my own motivations as an activist and my future. Meeting other people who have received it helped me understand that the impact of the award goes far beyond what can be measured qualitatively — it touches lives and very diverse personal experiences."

— **Jessica Morales, Guatemala,**
2023 Jude Byrne Emerging Female Leader Award Recipient

"Opportunities to get financial support or funding that allows us to directly sort out personal issues or mentorship are not available anywhere. As a person who has been systematically oppressed by the punitive policies, I will forever live in the vicious cycle, unable to do lots of work. Funding for self-help before we help others is the best way to achieve greater results or goals in advocacy efforts."

— **Yatie Jonet, Malaysia,**
2022 Jude Byrne Emerging Female Leader Award Recipient

The Jude Byrne Emerging Female Leader Award honours the memory of the legendary drug user advocate Jude Byrne. Established in 2022 by the International Network of People Who Use Drugs (INPUD) and the International Network on Health and Hepatitis in Substance Use (INHSU), this award offers a transformative opportunity for emerging female leaders within the global community of people who use drugs. Two recipients are chosen each year to participate in a 9-month individualised mentorship programme co-created with INPUD, along with a USD 10,000 award prize and a fully funded scholarship to the annual INHSU conference. The Jude Byrne Award was developed to address the lack of education and career opportunities for women who use drugs due to worldwide systemic stigma and discrimination. The Award invests in women who have the potential to make meaningful contributions to our community, but without the means to stake themselves due to economic and social inequities.

Jointly, INPUD and INHSU wanted to reflect on the Award to see what the impact has been for the recipients thus far. The methodology was simple: interviews with award recipients and review and analysis of the nomination data for patterns and trends from 2022 to 2025.¹

¹ This document included interviews of five of the recipients from 2022 to 2024: Danielle Russell, Jessica Morales, Alla Bessonova, Sarah Whipple, and Yatie Jonet. Each interview was about 45 minutes long, facilitated by a question guide, with follow-up questions answered through email.

Meet our Jude Byrne Award recipients



Danielle Russell
United States

When you meet people, hold them close. It's more important than the money in many ways. You're going to realise that your ways are different and that there's so much to learn. Sometimes you're going to be in spaces that feel really, really different and scary and overwhelming, and you just want something familiar, but you're about to embark on a new path in a new journey that will change your life.

2022

You're the best example of how much we have achieved through the years of hardship in our lifetime. Stay strong and be resilient and compassionate as you always have been. Keep fighting for the people that we care about, but it's important to keep your mental health intact by prioritising your well-being over others, which means securing yourself with your loved ones supporting you always.



Yatie Jonet
Malaysia



Jessica Morales
Guatemala

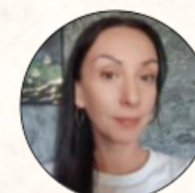
We need to remember that our goal is to build a better world and personal autonomy. This is a fight for our lives, so even though you're getting all the attention, being asked to speak everywhere and made to feel like a superstar, you must remain focused. This award is not only for you; it's for the people who come after you, those who were in front, and those who are beside you.

2023

If you are a woman who uses drugs, you have lots of trauma from the way society and people in your lives have treated you, but let it be your power — you're superpower! Your voice is so strong and important; activism is not for everyone. You need to know that you are special, and you should know that it's your calling.



Kira Watson
Scotland



Alla Bessonova
Kyrgyzstan

2024

I'm dreaming of a world where we get to rest and we are taken care of, so we have the power to do the work. So much is expected of ourselves, and this needs to change. We need to build communities of care inside and outside the movement to sustain our own self and others.



Sarah Whipple
United States



Kaumba Akuffo
Zambia

2025



Vielta Parkhomenko
Ukraine

Special Recognition Award Recipients



Angela McBride
South Africa, 2024



Rita Gatonye
Kenya, 2025



Joana Canêdo
Portugal, 2025

What is the impact of a mentorship award for women who use drugs?

Since the inception of the Jude Byrne Emerging Female Leader Award, almost 100 new emerging leaders in the fields of harm reduction and drug policy have been nominated from 32 countries. In 2025, the number of women nominated doubled, with 40 emerging leaders from 14 countries.

What we learned from the Jude Byrne recipients' experiences and what happens when you invest in the leadership of women who use drugs:

- **Increased global and regional networks** — At the time of winning the award, all recipients had worked at a very local level with little to no prior connections to regional or global spaces. Through the mentorship process, all recipients were linked to numerous mentors and other female leaders working in the field from all over the world, greatly expanding their networks and access to new knowledge, technologies, and ways of seeing the world.

"I work at such a local level in encampments. I had never been to a conference before. I had a lot of imposter syndrome. You know in general people don't listen to women. They're so many more layers of stigma. But the award sets up so many opportunities for support. I'm connected to the other recipients, and together we've built a community."

— **Sarah, United States**

- **Increased advocacy opportunities** — Becoming an Award recipient gave them a platform to share and sharpen their advocacy messaging, highlighting the experiences of women who use drugs in male-dominated spaces. These opportunities included speaking opportunities at the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs (UN CND), plenary lectures at INHSU, being session speakers at conferences, and engaging in national political legislation debates. In general, Award recipients reported at least five global advocacy experiences during their mentorship,² which continued long after their tenure was completed.

² We note that this is likely a larger number as recipients tended to under report and/or lump opportunities together. For example, they shared that they went to a conference but didn't share that they also had two speaking roles and a partner strategy meeting.

"There's so limited public speaking engagements for women who use drugs, and the mentorship helped me gain this experience. I was able to advocate nationally and in my state around legislation in Arizona. I was able to step outside my local box, to advocate both nationally and globally with more experience and learned new ideas and new networks."

— **Danielle, United States**

- **Investment in local community initiatives** — While the award money was specifically for the award recipients and their own personal development, this was commonly reinvested and shared with their local networks, from providing ongoing mental health service programmes to organising training and purchasing new equipment.

"I gave 50% of the money to the Eurasian Women's Network on AIDS to support seven other narcofeminists, so we could all have access to psychological support... together we learnt tools that we are applying to our work to keep us healthier."

— **Alla, Kyrgyzstan**

- **Amplification of marginalised communities in global spaces** — Recipients from Global Majority regions, in particular, were keen to build mechanisms to further engage women who use drugs in global decision-making spaces.

"I really felt like the work [and winning the award] was for all of us, all the women and transwomen who use drugs and work in harm reduction in Latin America. We won together, and finally we were represented at a global level or at least would be...I joined the Latin American working group for INHSU and was determined to support others to get where I was."

— **Jessica, Guatemala**

- **Increased economic opportunities** — The opportunities to connect with others in the field are extensive, and this resulted in multiple doors opening, linking Award recipients to other opportunities following their term. For many, this manifested as paid consultancy contracts, new career opportunities, and completing graduate studies.

"I've never felt stable. It's been really powerful to have that stability behind me to have it when I was in school and doing this work, and just someone I could lean on even if they weren't there all the time, I knew I could reach out, and that means a lot...I finished my PhD and was offered a postdoc at the Kirby Institute and moved halfway around the world."

— **Danielle, United States**

"I'm still actively working with IDPC through small grants, focusing on women and trans people, empowering them in drug use, drug policy, harm reduction, and mental health. It's a relief to have received the award, so I am able to get my financial issues resolved and my mental health problem sorted."

— **Yatie, Malaysia**

- **Importance of feeling seen and valued** — For many of the recipients of the Jude Byrne Award, the award came at a moment of questioning whether they should continue in this field. Many struggled with burnout or depression after years of difficult front-line experiences. Winning the Award became a pivotal moment in their lives, often the first time they felt seen and valued for their contributions. The mentorship supported future leaders by raising their self-esteem and providing them with customised support to continue in this field of work.

"The best part of the award is the recognition! Just having your name said out loud, and that you're doing this work, and you're working hard and trying to make things better, is enough, and that's what this award does first and foremost. I feel a lot of weight that I want to do a good job and speak for those who have died. So many people have died around me that the award gave me the opportunity to feel validated in a very, very tough community."

— **Danielle, United States**

- **Increased skills** — During the mentorship, recipients gained tangible skills through opportunities to go to training, workshops, site visits, shadowing, policy writing, and public speaking.

"I really wanted to understand how the UN processes worked. I was able to take an online course as part of my mentorship plan. I got to apply these skills in person when I went to the CND and spoke in a session."

— **Jessica, Guatemala**

- **Strengthened feminist intersectional analysis of the war on drugs** — This award has supported many young leaders to engage in feminist discourse and to push their understanding of systemic oppressions that women who use drugs experience from colonisation to criminalisation.

"As a narcofeminist, it opened me up to a different world, to different ideas. I understand now when Africans or other people talk about narcofeminism, I'm a part of that, I'm a part of that movement."

— **Alla, Kyrgyzstan**

"Others challenged me to think about quality of life, to think about climate justice, reproductive justice, and other intersections. Not many of us get the opportunity to engage in such dialogue, to be open to change. I'm so grateful that this award has given me that opportunity and this ongoing dialogue that I get to bring back to my community."

— **Sarah, United States**

- **Supporting other emerging feminist leaders** — They became mentors to others in their community and encouraged other emerging leaders in their local networks to apply. All recipients shared the importance of supporting other women who use drugs to apply for opportunities in the movement, including nominating others for the Jude Byrne Emerging Female Leader Award.

"It is important that the knowledge we gain as awardees continues to flow and does not remain only with us and our personal or professional experiences. It must flow into our communities and political spaces. I hope this award continues to plant seeds that blossom into bigger spaces and experiences."

— **Jessica, Guatemala**



Angela McBride, Sarah Whipple, and Annie Madden presenting at the INHSU conference in Athens, Greece, in 2024



Audience at the Community Day at the INHSU conference in Athens, Greece, in 2024

Investment, both financial and through supportive mentorship and guidance, in the leadership of women who use drugs has the potential not only for enormous personal growth but also for community growth. The Jude Byrne Emerging Female Leadership Award is a best practice in uplifting female advocates who use drugs in ways that lead to transformative change. In order to end the war on drugs, the world needs strong, equipped women who feel valued and supported in doing the important and often invisible work that they do in their communities.

To find out more about the Jude Byrne Award, visit [INPUD](#) or [INHSU](#) websites.

Jude Byrne Award Impact Mapping

