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Deseret News heroes of 2015: 7 people who made a difference this year



Les Bernal is the executive director of Stop Predatory Gambling. (Stop Predatory Gambling)

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Summary

Most heroes don't think of themselves as extraordinary people.

In fact, if you were to ask any of the people on this list if they think of themselves as heroes, they'd probably say no.

What they all have in common, however, is a desire to make a difference.

This year's list includes a doctor who has dedicated much of his life's work to a subject many of us avoid thinking about until it's too late: sickness, aging and death. Atul Gawande isn't just a doctor, he's a father and a journalist who has shined a light on subjects like the spread of Ebola and the long-term impacts of the Affordable Care Act.

“Our most cruel failure in how we treat the sick and the aged is the failure to recognize that they have priorities beyond merely being safe and living longer,” he said.

While Gawande is fairly well known, some of the heroes on this year's list are not. One of those is Kelly Murphy, a Nebraska mom who helps families cope with loss. And then there's Amrita Ahuja. A native of Mumbai, India, Ahuja has a Ph.D. in business economics from Harvard, but her interests lie beyond simply understanding how markets work, or how companies can maximize profit. Instead, Ahuja wants to figure out how to do the most good with the least amount of money possible. Call it efficient charity. Ahuja and her team are working to bring clean water to millions in the developing world and slow the spread of HIV.

This year, the Deseret News has selected seven heroes, one for each of our areas of editorial emphasis. While these heroes come from all walks of life and all corners of the globe, each has found a way to make the world a better place. We hope their examples can inspire us all to do the same, in ways both big and small.

Faith: Brian Grim

After more than a decade of gathering and analyzing data about where religion is practiced and suppressed around the world, Brian Grim noticed that where freedom to worship is restricted, so are jobs and business opportunities — and vice versa.

That correlation between religious freedom and economic growth sparked an idea that prompted the 56-year-old leading expert on international religious demography to leave a senior researcher post at the Pew Research Center and become president of the [Religious Freedom & Business Foundation](#).

"I've come to see that this is one of the most promising new ways to address the rising tide (of religious persecution) that I have been documenting and measuring," said Grim, a practicing Roman Catholic, when he joined the foundation in 2014. "What I am doing is the result of looking at data and trends, and I tried to see what might make a difference. And I think this might make a big difference."

The past two years have taken him around the world informing and enlisting business, government and faith leaders in creating economic opportunity through enhancing religious freedom. In October, Grim presented to the World Economic Forum's Network of Global Agenda Councils his [latest research](#) showing how growing religious diversity will alter the world's distribution of wealth. The demographics and market analysis are part of a toolkit the WEF's Global Council on the Role of Faith is developing for business executives on religious literacy, according to a [news release](#) on the research.

This year, Grim's foundation launched the [Empowerment Plus Initiative](#), designed to help faith communities address issues of unemployment, crime and radicalization among adherents. A pilot program through St. Mary's University in London, where Grim is a visiting professor, will form volunteer interfaith teams to mentor at-risk individuals, particularly immigrants, in developing skills that can lead to employment, business development and integration into the surrounding society.

"I don't think there is anyone who has developed this level of understanding of these relationships between the freedom of religion and its role in economic lives," Paul Godfrey, a business strategy professor at Brigham Young University's Marriott School of Management, said of Grim's work. "What (Alexis) de Toqueville saw 200 years ago in the strong community, religious basis of Americans and their industriousness, Brian is now documenting in a scientific way" to advance peace and opportunity worldwide.

Media: Yalda Uhls

At the turn of the millennium, Yalda Uhls had a choice to make. She had a successful career in the film industry as a producer for major studios like MGM and little reason to pursue a different career path. But Uhls was also a new mom fascinated at how her children would grow up in a world increasingly dominated by the Internet and digital devices.

Eager to learn, Uhls chose to leave her career behind and study media effects in child development and psychology, eventually earning her Ph.D. in developmental psychology from UCLA in 2013. What she learned quelled her fear and gave her hope for a generation of kids growing up as digital natives — a feeling she wanted to pass on to America's parents.

"I was scared. My kids were growing up at the same time as the digital revolution was taking off," Uhls said in a presentation for the [Google Authors series in November](#). "But the fear didn't jibe with the research I was reading."

Her focus ever since has been on the intersection of technology and child development, whether working as a research scientist for UCLA or with family and media advocacy nonprofit Common Sense Media.

This year, the Deseret News National recognizes Uhls as a hero in the area of media for her stellar parenting book, "[Media Moms and Digital Dads: A Fact-Not-Fear Approach to Parenting in the Digital Age](#)." Pulling together decades of research and science on media and child development, Uhls builds her book around tested wisdom rather than playing on parents' insecurities.

Her even-handed approach and position as a voice of reason rather than alarm makes Uhls an asset to any parent who has ever worried about the hours spent in front of a screen.

Wellness: Atul Gawande

End-of-life care emerged as a key wellness issue in 2015, as doctors, patients and politicians considered what it means to "die well." Medicare announced it would begin reimbursing doctors for appointments dedicated to end-of-life planning and, in October, California became the fifth state to legalize physician-assisted suicide.

Atul Gawande was an early entrant into these debates. His 2014 book, "Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End," explored the American health care system's disordered approach to death and dying, drawing on Gawande's experiences as a surgeon at Brigham and Women's Hospital.

“Our most cruel failure in how we treat the sick and the aged is the failure to recognize that they have priorities beyond merely being safe and living longer,” he wrote.

Throughout his medical career, Gawande has been committed to sharing his insights with the broader public. His four books have had a profound impact on medicine and national health policy. His 2009 book, "The Checklist Manifesto," was a national best-seller, arguing that the answer to avoiding catastrophic mistakes in high-pressure jobs was simple: strict adherence to a checklist. As a staff writer for The New Yorker, he regularly covers public health issues like the Affordable Care Act and the Ebola epidemic. The 50-year-old is also a father of three who is willing to share stories from his personal life to shine a light on difficult choices all families face.

Causes: Amrita Ahuja

Growing up in Mumbai, Amrita Ahuja couldn't escape the fact that some people have very difficult lives, which she said encouraged her to stay engaged with issues of poverty. Even as a child, however, she was disappointed with how half-baked many philanthropic efforts were, providing minimal impact for just a select few.

So while completing a Ph.D. in business economics at Harvard University, Ahuja thought it would be a good idea to take small-scale development efforts — ones with well-documented efficacy — and put capital behind them to impact millions of people.

With a team of accomplished academics and development economists, Ahuja started [Evidence Action](#) in 2013 with one goal: the greatest good for the least amount of money.

The nonprofit has used Ahuja's own research on water sanitation to launch Dispensers for Safe Water, which places chlorine dispensers at water sources in Kenya, Uganda and Malawi. It's a simple fix to unsafe drinking water, a problem that that kills 3.4 million each year. The program currently serves 4.3 million, and the average cost per person is \$0.64 per year.

Evidence Action's greatest success has come through its Deworm the World initiative, which has treated 110 million children. The initiative scaled up the work of Michael Kremer, a mentor of Ahuja's at Harvard, and provides antiparasitic medicine to children for less than \$0.50 each year.

Donations have grown exponentially in the past two years, and GiveWell named Deworm the World as one of its top charities in both 2014 and 2015. World Bank President Jim Yong Kim has said mass deworming is the most cost-effective way to boost educational attainment in the developing world.

Evidence Action is currently studying other projects to potentially scale through its “beta” program, including HIV education and a program that aims to find farmers work during periods of drought.

Family: Kelly Murphy

Her son's disappearance on June 13, 2001, launched Kelly Murphy on a journey that has helped thousands of families figure out how to take the next step as they cope with the loss of a loved one.

Jason Jolkowski, then 19, was last seen taking the garbage cans to the curb of their home in Omaha, Nebraska. He then waited for a ride to his job. He never got there. He simply vanished, and no clues have ever been found.

Murphy coped with anguish and other emotions, some that may never completely resolve. But she didn't stop moving. She launched [Project Jason](#), an organization that helps families who have missing loved ones figure out their next step, whether it's getting media attention to help in the search or learning to live a somewhat normal life in extraordinarily challenging circumstances.

There are a lot of people coping with such a loss. The FBI and the National Crime Information Center collect more than 800,000 missing person reports each year, with 105,000 annually that never get solved. Murphy also helped Jason's Law get passed in Nebraska, establishing the state's missing person clearinghouse.

Murphy lives in Renton, Washington, where she works full time for a company that sells outdoor gear and clothing, but as president and founder of Project Jason she is still fully engaged with the organization. It provides families with tips, private community boards, access to free online counseling with a qualified counselor and an annual "Keys to Healing" retreat that brings together loved ones of those who are missing to share ideas and help each other heal.

Moneywise: Les Bernal

Religious organizations are often on the forefront of anti-gambling campaigns because they take a moral exception to governments using lotteries and slot machines to bring in revenue.

Les Bernal doesn't take the "family values" approach. While he empathizes with those who oppose gambling for moral reasons, he's not opposed to a casual game of poker among friends or a \$10 bet in a March Madness pool. Instead, he started the nonprofit Stop Predatory Gambling in 2008 with a populist angle, arguing that state-sponsored gambling is "taxation by exploitation" — a regressive tax on the poor.

"This is a public policy where the more you use it, the more you lose. It's an absolute certainty," Bernal says. "It's not a debate about whether people should be gambling, it's a debate about the role of government in beginning to provide real opportunity for everyday people rather than cheating and exploiting them."

Bernal was a chief-of-staff in the Massachusetts Senate for nearly a decade. He occasionally bought lottery tickets and played at casinos, but then he began working for an anti-gambling state senator. After doing research about the demographics and business models of casinos, he said he found his "calling" — he left his "cushy job" in 2007 to become an advocate against state-sponsored gambling.

His rhetoric could fit comfortably into a Bernie Sanders stump speech; he's become a go-to interview for TV news, describing in his Boston accent the way powerful interests pull politicians to maximize profits and prey on a naive population. In 2013, he gave congressional testimony against a failed bill that would create state-sponsored online poker. This March, he again testified again in support of a bill that would ban online gambling, which was then introduced in the Senate this summer by Lindsay Graham and Marco Rubio.

Education: Shauna Tominey

Shauna Tominey, a research scientist and director of early childhood programming and teacher education at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, focuses on building social skills and resilience in children from underprivileged families — cutting-edge areas of concern as it becomes increasingly apparent that education achievement gaps cannot be closed through academics alone.

Tominey emphasizes aspects of early childhood development that were often overlooked in the past 15 years, a period when pressure to get more information and academic skills into children at ever earlier ages crowded out the social and emotional growth that makes for healthy adults.

In an important contribution to the pushback against academic tunnel vision, Tominey this year coauthored "[Stop, Think, Act](#): Integrating Self-Regulation in the Early Childhood Classroom" (Routledge, 130 pages, \$34.95 paperback).

Tominey also has a passion for music and increasingly sees her education and music careers as intertwined. She has created a website, storytimesongs.com, with resources to help parents and teachers integrate music into instruction.

"While working as an early childhood teacher in an inclusive classroom," she writes on her website, "I found that the best way to engage children from a variety of ages and developmental needs was to use music. When music was brought into the classroom, children were more likely to pay attention, follow directions, and remember new words and ideas. Days that felt the most successful and enjoyable for the children were those when we integrated music into lessons."