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STRENGTHENING RURAL MINNESOTA

For immediate release

First-ever Blandin Foundation American Indian Alumni Gathering highlights engaging youth

GRAND RAPIDS, Minn. (May 11, 2009) – During their first-ever leadership alumni gathering, today’s leaders in American Indian communities across Minnesota discussed how to engage and encourage tomorrow’s leaders – American Indian youth.

The Blandin Foundation’s American Indian Alumni Gathering, held May 6 and 7 in Grand Rapids, Minn., brought together 86 alumni of the Blandin Community Leadership Program and the Blandin Reservation Community Leadership Program. Participants represented seven Ojibwe and two Dakota tribes.

The event gave American Indian leadership program participants – who had participated in leadership programs between 1994 and 2009 – the opportunity to reconnect and reflect on their common leadership training experiences and assets.

Participants then reviewed findings from the American Indian Youth Summit, a gathering of nearly 100 youth held in 2006, and developed community action plans to support and engage youth in building healthy community by building on community strengths and addressing barriers

“The alumni gathering actually has its roots in youth’s call for leadership,” said Valerie Shangreaux, Blandin Foundation’s director of leadership. “It gave American Indian community leaders important information about youth’s perceptions, and a forum for leaders to discuss ways to involve, interest and connect youth in building healthy community.”

“We’re here to assist our youth,” said Dr. Kathy Annette, a member of Blandin Foundation’s American Indian Advisory Board, during the conference’s opening remarks. “It’s a day we really have to put on our eagle wings.”

Youth identified school and after-school activities, strong multi-generational family support systems and upholding cultural traditions and language revitalization as reinforcing elements of community. Restraining elements included financial challenges, substance abuse, violence and few opportunities.

Action plans called for organization of another youth summit; establishing a United National Indian Tribal Youth (UNITY) chapter; recognition of youth accomplishments through ceremonies; community naming ceremonies; developing curriculum based on the seven

values of Ojibwe and Dakota life; language and culture instruction; and encouraging use of available family-support resources.

Keynote speaker Dr. Thomas Peacock, associate dean of the College of Education and Human Service Professions at the University of Minnesota-Duluth and member of the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe, discussed American Indian youths' expression of hope and despair, based on multiple interviews with about 120 American Indian seventh- and eighth-grade students in the U.S. and Canada. He is the author of numerous books, including *The Dance of Hope and Despair*, to be released sometime in 2010.

"Multiple trauma, that's what makes our kids different," Peacock said. "Each student recalled trauma in their life. Their families really don't have a car or electricity in their house, they really have seen family members use drugs or drink or get beaten, they really have slept on a couch because they got kicked out of the house, they really do know people who have committed suicide."

But youth also know – and have – hope. Peacock recalled one student's comment about hope:

"I ride the bus to school every day, and I sit by the window so I can see what's out there, because every day I see something new and learn something new," she said.

Seeking ways to build and sustain that hope was a key goal for alumni gathering participants.

"Our work today is the tomorrow coming," commented Roxanne DeLille, one of the gathering's trainers.

"We're doing this work so that when youth do the dance of hope and despair, the partner they choose is hope," said Ann Glumac, another trainer.

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Photo caption

TPeacockVShangreaux

Valerie Shangreaux (left), Blandin Foundation director of leadership, presents a Pendleton quilt to Dr. Tom Peacock from the University of Minnesota-Duluth following Peacock's keynote presentation on hope and despair as expressed by American Indian youth. Peacock's remarks were made during the first-ever American Indian Alumni Gathering held in Grand Rapids, Minn., May 6 -7.

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Participants in the Blandin Foundation American Indian Alumni Gathering brainstorm action plans for involving youth in community. The first-ever gathering brought more than 80 American Indian community leaders to Grand Rapids, Minn., May 6 - 7.

Blandin Foundation, Minnesota's largest rural-based private foundation, is located in Grand Rapids, Minn. Its mission is to strengthen rural Minnesota communities, especially the Grand Rapids area, through grants, leadership development programs and public policy initiatives.

Media contact:
Allison Rajala Ahcan, communications director
218-326-0523
arahcan@blandinfoundation.org
www.BlandinFoundation.org