

**FINAL**

***Building Local Capacity to Sustain Development Initiatives***

*Delivered by Blandin Foundation President and CEO Dr. Kathleen Annette*

*Community Development Society Conference*

*July 25, 2016 – Bloomington/Mall of America Hilton*



Hello! Aanin!

Welcome to Minnesota! I am honored that you have invited me to share some thoughts today.

But, first, I wonder if you might share some information with ME?

Please let me know by a show of hands....

How many of you traveled here from outside of North America?

Welcome!

How many of you are from Minnesota?

Okay, now how many of you work with communities that you would consider RURAL?

Wonderful! What a mix of differences, yet you share passion for the health and resilience of places. Of communities.

I share your passion!

Speaking of place, you may not realize that--right no--we are close to a very special place. The Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge.

[SLIDE]



Just across the street is a corridor of land and water stretching nearly 70 miles along the Minnesota River. Not only does the refuge provide valuable habitat for a diversity of waterfowl and other migratory birds, fish and wildlife—it's 14,000 acres (or 4,700 hectares) of connective tissue.

- Human to animal,
- industrial to natural,
- urban to rural.

And, considering that some of the species here migrate thousands of miles, this is place connected to many countries and continents.

So fitting, then, that we are here today together. Because change follows relationships. Progress is possible because we are connected.

It is sadly obvious when we are NOT in relationship, when people are NOT connected.

I struggle to get through reading the news every day. We are facing challenges, aren't we?

One thing I know, though, is that we can do together what seems impossible to do alone. I see, every day, how people come together for the sake of their communities.

How do communities gain the capacity to do the heavy work of creating ambitious, vibrant and resilient futures? And, when they do, how can it be sustained?

This year, my organization celebrates 75 years of standing with Minnesota's rural communities to design and claim ambitious, resilient futures. How many communities?

[SLIDE]



We've worked with 209 places on broadband, provided grants in 5400 communities, and there are Blandin-trained community leaders in 2100 communities.

My hope is that some of the insights gleaned from the past quarter-century will be helpful to you as you are bulding local capacity to sustain development.

First, a bit more background...

Blandin Foundation is one of only a handful of private foundations in the United States focused exclusively in rural places. By rural, we define this as communities of fewer than 35,000 people.

I realize that the concept of philanthropy means different things around the world.

We do three main things:

First, we provide grants of money, primarily to other nonprofits. For example, we provided a grant to help support this conference. Each year, we award about \$12 million in grants. And only in Minnesota.

Blandin Foundation also works with rural Minnesota communities on issues that could have significant impact on their futures. Right now, one of those big issues we have been working on is access to--and use of--high-speed Internet, or broadband.

[SLIDE: photo of Project FINE, along with a map]



In Winona, Minnesota, which is a few hours from here, Project FINE has been teaching people new to this country how to use the Internet—in their native languages.

So that they can communicate with family, apply for jobs, take classes, and so on. Winona—and its leaders such as those at Project Fine--have participated in our Blandin Community Broadband Program that helps the community to decide

- what technology infrastructure it needs for its future,
- connects leaders as they explore options, and
- supports them with matching grants as they learn and explore technology.

The third thing Blandin Foundation does is to train rural people in community leadership.

[SLIDE: photo]



There is no question. The best investment we ever have made in sustained, positive change is training diverse and committed community leaders.

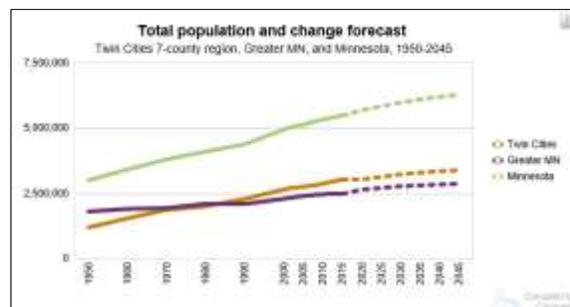
More than 7,000 community leaders have spent up to 8 long days in leadership training with the Blandin Foundation over the past 30 years. We have had the honor of spending more than half a million hours with these local leaders.

Are there Leadership Program alums in the room today? Great!

That's the Blandin Foundation.

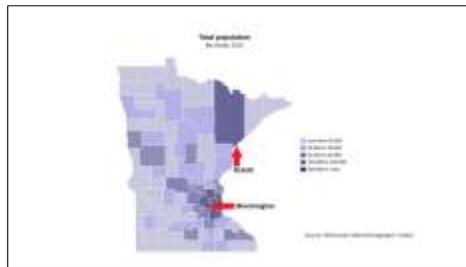
[PAUSE]

[SLIDE: graph]



For those of you not from this state, a few points of reference about where you are. In Minnesota, our population is split about equally between the metro region (which includes Minneapolis and St. Paul) and everywhere else, which we call “greater Minnesota.”

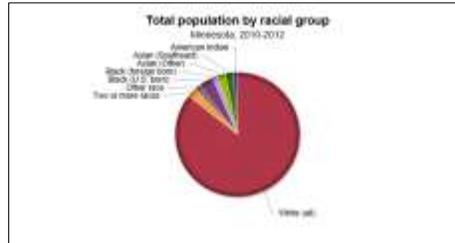
[SLIDE: map]



We have large parts of the state that are full of small towns, cities and townships. (The light-gray areas.) Some of our rural counties (like St. Louis County) have quite low density, but are skewed by a single larger city (like Duluth).

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[SLIDE: pie chart]



Our racial and ethnic picture looks like this. We are a dominantly white culture. In both urban and rural places, we also are seeing growth in diversity that has come with new people, often immigrants, filling gaps in the workforce.

If I were to describe rural Minnesota in a few words, I would say that:

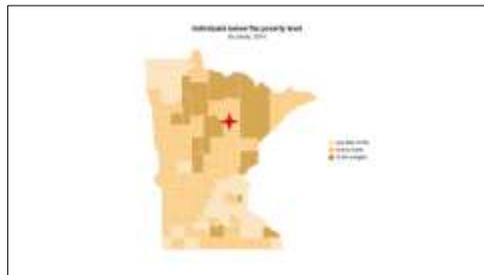
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- We are nearly half of the state's population
  - We fill the landscape with hardworking, diverse and passionate people
  - We require a lot of community leaders
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[SLIDE]



I also want you to know that rural Minnesota is a place of assets—beautiful lakes and rivers, Rich forests, minerals and earth. Inspiring children. Thriving indigenous peoples. And, yes, challenges.

[SLIDE: state map]



For example, much of the state’s poverty is in rural areas. Especially in northern Minnesota, where we are based. (Darker areas are the highest number of people below the poverty level.)

[SLIDE: photo]



You should also know that the Community Development landscape in Minnesota is quite rich!

There are many Regional Development Organizations. Plus, local, regional, state, federal and academic partners are engaged. Some of us foundations are at the table, too. We are working together to both better align and to build and sustain our capacity.

A shout-out to those who lead this work to bring us together around community development in Minnesota. As if you don't have enough to do to focus on your own region, you have seen the possibilities of working together. That's leadership!

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[SLIDE: photo]



Yes, each community, each region is different. And yet, we have common interest in resiliency. Collaboration is one way we sustain each other.

Together we can better communicate that “community development matters.” And, together we can help to explain that the work has changed. Today’s development looks different. In the new economy, barriers of distance have disappeared. Community vibrancy is more complex—it demands that we look beyond the mainstream.

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In Minnesota, we also have identified the opportunity to learn together. Together, we have created the Minnesota Network of Community Developers. Blandin Foundation is honored to facilitate this work, because we see how innovation and change is happening at the local level. If you want to be hopeful, look at local people designing and claiming their futures. This is where change and hope is, at community.

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[SLIDE: photo]



I heard a funny story the other day.

A rocket scientist was asked if his work was hard. He said, “You think this is hard work? Try community work.”

Community, after all, is not a thing. It is a living system. Or, more accurately, a web of inter-connected systems. (Like the Refuge across the street.) [POINT]

Every community is different. A community is shaped by its geography, its history, its resources and the cultures of its peoples.

And, yet, we see some common themes. Here are my top five lessons learned.

[SLIDE]



**Lesson Number One: The healthier the community, the more its residents are able to solve problems and create new trajectories.**

In Blandin Foundation's experience, community "health" can be understood and assessed through 9 lenses, or dimensions. While they are distinct, these dimensions are inter-related.

I'd like to describe each just a little bit.



- [SLIDE]

- **Life-long Learning** -- In a healthy community, all ages have access to educational opportunities. People are engaged, they're informed, they're fired up!

[SLIDE]

- **Inclusion** -- People consistently and intentionally see and seek differences, believing that their community is stronger for them.

I need to tell you about Grand Rapids and the Circle of Healing. The Circle is a wide range of individuals who have meeting to understand, and now to reconcile, differences between White and Native American cultures and history.

The police chief, the chamber of commerce president, a judge, and a whole bunch of diverse people—meeting to hear from each other, to dig deep into issues like historical trauma, and to imagine a different future for the region and it's peoples. It's a terrific example of intentional inclusion!

[SLIDE]

- **Recreational and artistic opportunity** -- that meet the needs of all and express the cultural backgrounds, talents and experience of all community members.

[SLIDE]

- **Environmental Stewardship** -- Environmental sustainability is very present for rural places—where we have many of the country's solutions, like wind power and

forests. Rural places also are particularly vulnerable to forces like climate change

[SLIDE]

- **Infrastructure and Services** -- Whether it's transportation, broadband, water, sanitary living conditions—everyone has access.

[SLIDE]

- **Safety and Security** -- measures that protect everybody, informed by differences such as culture and mental health.

In our recent Rural Pulse study of statewide perceptions, we definitely have seen heightened concern. It's tough to focus on anything else, when you don't feel safe.

[SLIDE]

- **Community Leadership** -- I'll say more about this in a bit.

[SLIDE]

- **Economic opportunity** -- All people can earn an income that allows them to live with dignity.

[SLIDE]

- **Spirituality and Wellness** – A healthy community recognizes that a person does best when they are sound in body, healthy in mind, and grounded in values that direct their lives. This goes for you community developers, too.

Again, it is the *balance* of all these separate, but inter-related, dimensions that leads to a healthy community. And a healthy community is much more able to create and sustain positive change.

[SLIDE: Lesson 2]



The second lesson I'd like to share with you is that **Change can happen from anywhere.**

Especially today, a leader does not need the power of position to make things happen for their community. Anyone can frame issues, build social capital and mobilize resources. In fact, one of the hallmarks of healthy communities is that engagement and power are widely distributed with multiple stakeholders.

[SLIDE]



The Fond du Lac Band of Ojibwe, northeast of here, took this challenge head-on. The band's Information Technology team stepped up as leaders in an unprecedented way.

They saw economic opportunity in their community's ability to leverage technology—wi-fi access, lots of training, strategic planning for infrastructure.

In the process, youth participated in the band's App Camp and created websites and apps that bring culture to life—both for their own generation and others. Technology and culture leadership now is coming from those youth...wow.

Again, change can happen from anywhere. Change at Fond du Lac is happening from everywhere.

[SLIDE: Lesson 3]



Closely related to that is lesson #3: **Leadership is an unlimited resource.**

Interestingly, leadership is even more needed in rural communities than in larger cities.

At University of Minnesota Extension's Center for Community Vitality, Ben Winchester has been measuring rural leadership. Ben will remind you that, on a per-capita basis, rural communities need more leaders to get things done. A big thank you to Ben and Extension for your thought leadership on brain gain and rural community!

So, how is rural doing on attracting and developing community leaders?

[SLIDE: RP data]



The hard truth is, not all communities put their people assets to work.

Our Rural Pulse survey found that 26% of respondents had *never* been invited to play a leadership role. And only 41% of rural residents say they had recently served in a community leadership role.

I know that, as community developers, you have a vested interest in a community's ability to get things done.

So, a question for you.... Where do you have the opportunity to reach out and invite someone into a role of leadership, someone who just needs to hear, “You are the leader we have been waiting for?”

[PAUSE]

[SLIDE]



I grew up on the Red Lake Reservation.

As a girl, I was given the name “Anna KOO ba day” by an Anishinaabe elder in my community. Some girls are given names that mean “beautiful flower” or “rising sun.” But not me. My Indian name means “to tie to together.” From the day I was named, I was invited to be a leader. Not just any kind of leader, but one who ties together—what an honor. What a challenge!

And as someone whose name means “to tie together,” I especially love Leadership Lesson #4:

**Sustainable community action is anchored in the quality and diversity of its connections.**

[SLIDE]



Sustainable community action—that’s what we’re talking about today, right?

By investing in a broader set of relationships for you, your organizations, and helping your communities do the same, community action – progress – will stick better.

The Rural Pulse survey tells us that we have work to do as we develop our leaders. 43% - Nearly half - do not feel that local

leadership **reflects representation from people of differing backgrounds.**

[SLIDE]



Finally – lesson number five:

**In order for a community to change, it has to have hope.**

Hope is believing that a different future is possible, for ourselves, our people, our communities. Hope is being able to imagine what that future might be. Wise leaders know that creating a shared vision for the future, a vision arising from and embraced by the community, is the engine that powers change. When people have hope, they can accomplish amazing things and better overcome difficult things.

Sometimes hope emerges from unlikely places. From tragedy.

[SLIDE]



About 10 years ago, a 16-year-old student at the Red Lake High School, a reservation in northern Minnesota, went on a shooting rampage that left 10 people dead and seven injured. He killed his own grandfather, a teacher, a school security guard and five other students before killing himself. Another dozen people were injured.

Because of my role at the Indian Health Service, I was assigned to coordinate the local response for the federal Department of Health and Human Services. At the time, I was the most senior federal official who was geographically close. Plus I happened not only to be Native but was raised on the Red Lake Reservation.

That was my high school. I knew the teacher who was killed. I knew both the shooter's and students' families. Being a physician and having worked with the reservation leadership for years helped. I trusted them and they trusted me.

There was so much to organize, but my most immediate role was to be there, to be home. I remember being so very sad, so many funerals. I saw leadership from so many– I remember a nurse at the hospital who stepped forward to tell me about her colleagues who'd been up for days and wouldn't go home, who had tended to the injured and had made a makeshift morgue at the hospital and grieved and supported to many. Leadership, in her case, meant to ask for help.

[SLIDE]



Even in those days of terrible tragedy were the seeds of hope: the absolute commitment to protect the children, the urgency to get the school back together, to create a promising future.

Communities established youth leadership councils and we strengthened the local Boys and Girls Clubs. We took on drug and alcohol problems, youth leadership, even cancer prevention. All elements of the community came together—tribal leadership, fire department, educators, the health care system--everybody. Many partners stood by us, including Blandin Foundation.

We used what we'd learned about leadership during this time of horrendous tragedy to help the community heal and emerge stronger than before—resilient and hopeful.

You are out in your communities, working to make them even better places to live and work every day, so you already know this, but it bears repeating: nothing truly worthwhile has ever been easy. There's a lot of hard work ahead.

I hope that my stories and the Five Lessons will be of value to you in your own journey:

[slide: advance lessons 1 at a time.]

1. It takes a healthy community to move forward.
2. Change can happen from anywhere.
3. Leadership is an unlimited resource.
4. Quality and diverse connections sustain progress.
5. Hope leads to change.

[PAUSE] [LOOK OUT AT AUDIENCE]

When people arrive at our leadership training retreats, we tell them, “YOU are the leaders we’ve been waiting for.” I remember how I felt when they said it to me. What a wonderful and awesome sense of challenge there comes with hearing it.

[PAUSE] [SAY IT TO THE AUDIENCE WITH INTENT]

“You are the leaders we’ve been waiting for.”

[SLIDE]



Invest in community leadership. Great community leaders frame issues, build social capital and mobilize resources. They know that they have to do it themselves, but they can't do it alone.

Know that complex community issues still come down to local leadership, and that it's possible to move a community and change a system. A great example is broadband—very complex.

Assess your connections. Encourage those you serve to do the same. Because change breaks along relationship lines. How healthy are your relationships? How diverse are they? With whom are you connected? To whom aren't you connected?

Try this—map an issue you really care about. Put it in the center, then ask yourselves—who are we connected to on this issue? Even better, ask—who is not yet connected to this issue?

[SLIDE]



Reach out and bring differences into your midst. To be honest, you may need to ask others to help you see beyond your own reality. I know that Blandin Foundation did.

Right now, we have one of the most diverse board of trustees I am aware of. Racially, politically, age, lifestyle, economic status—we have been extremely intentional. And it makes us stronger.

And, it's a journey.

[SLIDE: image]



Finally, every once in a while, stand still. For your own sake, as well as the community's. Know that what you need is there. That good change is possible. And take care of yourself. Your work can be lonely, it can be exhausting and frustrating—and it can change the future.

Over and over, I see that **that real communities are built through hard work** - the hard work of leadership, of genuine inclusion, of reaching across boundaries and building lasting connections.

That's the fertile soil from which resilient, vibrant rural communities grow.

And you are a big part of this.

**I believe that we *all* are in the hope business.**

Thank you. Miigwetch.

[SLIDE]



[WHEN READY, FADE TO BLACK]

