



We Stand With You

By: Kathy Annette, President and CEO

As dramatic and tragic racial tension in major cities across the country has become uncomfortably present in our national discourse, what is an organization focused on strengthening *rural* communities in Minnesota to do or say?

Blandin Foundation board and staff continually challenge ourselves to ask, “Have we catalyzed communities’ ability to expand opportunity for *all* residents?” Because with 75 years of experience, we know that a truly vibrant community will be one where *every* member has both options for their life, and the ability to pursue those paths to their fullest end.

While we have much to do and learn as an organization, Blandin Foundation intentionally has wrestled with differences that make a difference and has first-hand knowledge of what’s happening in Minnesota’s rural communities. And as we all process the events of recent weeks, I share the following, ever-hopeful that we can do together what is so very difficult to do alone—welcome and engage each other, no matter our differences, for the sake of our communities.

Blandin Foundation has had the privilege of training more than 7,000 rural Minnesota leaders in community leadership over the past 30 years. That’s more than a half-million hours we have spent together in deep conversation and learning. Confirmed by the experiences we have with grantees and other partners, we have come to the understanding that healthy communities are places where all dimensions are active.



The most challenging of these dimensions to activate is that of Inclusion, meaning that people consistently make the effort to see and seek differences in their community, to intentionally seek ways to tap the diverse backgrounds, experiences and skills of everyone for the benefit of the whole community.

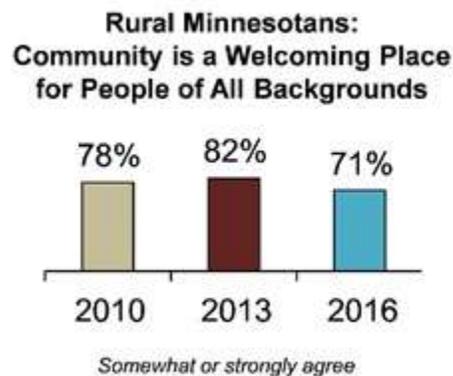
In the midst of the dark days being seen by our country and world, I keep in front of me hope. Hope is believing that a different future is possible, for ourselves, our country, our communities.

Hope is the Anishinaabe educator activist and the police chief in Grand Rapids, who have teamed up to offer Anishinaabe worldview training for community leaders—including the entire police force.

Hope is the sight of the increasing diversity of people that communities are nominating to attend the Blandin Community Leadership Program.

And the engineering professor who believes that students will be stronger--better prepared for the world and for community leadership--if racial differences are intentionally invited into his classroom.

Our work together, however, is far from done. The foundation's Rural Pulse™ survey of Minnesotans this year found, unfortunately, that nearly one-third of Minnesotans do not feel their community is welcoming to people of varying backgrounds and perspectives, down sharply from previous surveys. This is a sentiment equally shared by residents who are of color, indigenous and Caucasian.



Source: Blandin Foundation Rural Pulse 2016

Interestingly, those surveyed who are over age 65 were more confident (with 75% agreeing to this question), while millennials were most critical (67% agreeing).

I believe, as does the Foundation, that rural Minnesotans can—and must—do what it takes to appreciate, and effectively work across, our differences.

Diversity exists in rural places as well as big cities. Inclusion of diverse backgrounds, experiences, skills and perspectives can make our rural communities strong and vibrant. I encourage you to learn about and reflect on your own culture and how that has shaped your perceptions and beliefs, learn about the cultural backgrounds of people in your community, and interact and build relationships with a diverse array of people in your community.

Rural community leaders are those who do what it takes to get things done in their communities, for their communities. They also know they must do it themselves, but they can't do it alone.

We stand with you.