



# Community Leader

Blandin Community Leadership Programs Newsletter

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**Community Leader** is a quarterly exchange for news, learning and connection published by the Blandin Foundation leadership programs for those engaged in the effort to build economically viable communities where the benefits are widely shared.

Jim Hoolihan  
President

Jim Krile  
Leadership Director

Malissa Bahr  
Recruitment Manager

Staff  
Paula Troumbley  
Becky Adams  
Trisha Zimmerman  
Shari Solem

Blandin Foundation  
100 N. Pokegama Avenue  
Grand Rapids, MN 55744  
Phone: 218.326.0523  
Toll Free: 877.882.2257  
Fax: 218.327.1949  
bfinfo@blandinfoundation.org

Online at  
[BlandinFoundation.org](http://BlandinFoundation.org)

## Notable Leader

### *Keeper of the Heart: Johanna Christianson*

What's it like, do you suppose, to come to this country for the first time?

How does it feel to leave behind family, friends, language, culture, and a history uniquely your own? Where do you fit in a small community with its own notions of who belongs and who does not?

Johanna Christianson, a 1994 Blandin Community Leadership Program (BCLP) alum, understands those questions because she herself is an immigrant. While her story may be unlike that of many of Minnesota's newest immigrants, she has not forgotten what it means to be a stranger.

In 1976, as the nineteen-year old bride of Jim Christianson, Johanna arrived in Pelican Rapids where Jim's family lived. They'd returned from Amsterdam where Johanna was born and raised, to help with the family businesses.

Prior to their arrival, Johanna's mother-in-law put the newlyweds' picture in the local paper, which meant that people soon were coming up to her on the street and greeting her by name or asking about the Netherlands. "I never forgot how it felt to be welcomed, to feel that I belonged," she recalls.

Mentored by her father-in-law about community life, Johanna quickly gained recognition for her volunteer work. It came naturally to her because she grew up in a large family clan in Amsterdam where it was simply expected one would be "a good neighbor."

In the early 1990's the sense of neighborliness in Pelican Rapids faced a challenge as immigrants

from Bosnia and the Sudan moved there, recruited for jobs at the turkey plant. Emotions

were high among local citizens about who these new people were and how they fit into the life of the community. Adjustment was not easy for anyone.

One day the director of the local food shelf called Johanna, asking if she could drive her to make a delivery to some newcomers living in trailers on the edge of town. "What I saw made me realize I couldn't just drive away after we delivered the food,"

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Johanna and a friend

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## 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Reflections From the President

Even though we are well into the new year, I still have a holiday frame of mind. That is, I am reflective and grateful for the many BCLP alums I was privileged to meet during the summer 2005 Anniversary workshops and retreats. Each of the eight regional workshops and the

several retreats I attended was memorable.

We started at Bay Lake on June 16<sup>th</sup> and concluded September 29<sup>th</sup> here in Grand Rapids.

Whether it was in Bemidji, Rochester, Ely, Mankato or Alexandria, I was buoyed and fortified by the heartfelt expressions of generosity toward Blandin. I heard the story of a woman who said that attending the BCLP was like receiving her college degree. I heard from others who credited their BCLP experiences with helping them pass school referendums, keep hospitals and expand YMCA's.

While we provided the training and theory, you provided the passion, commitment, persistence and hard work to accomplish great things.

I was struck by the optimism for the future — grounded in the knowledge and experience of what it really takes to successfully serve on city councils, school boards and other organizations. Strengthening communities is hard work. And this work helps us all. All of us at the Foundation are honored by your work.

Rural life is not quiet, quaint and bucolic, as some might imagine. We know that rural work and life are difficult at times, yet we know it is worthwhile to the entire state that we continue; that was your gift — a deeper appreciation just how vital rural Minnesota is.

You sustain me and the entire foundation with your passion, zeal and commitment. We are indeed fortunate to be among people who learn, lead, love, and never give up.

Jim Hoolihan

## 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Reflections 2006: Year of the Alumni

More than 650 of you took time and energy to participate in the eight workshops we held throughout the state as part of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Blandin Community Leadership Program (BCLP).

As the late Hubert H. Humphrey would say: "We are pleased as punch!"

That so many from all parts of the state reunited to refresh your skills, reconnect with other alums, and recharge your leadership batteries is a gift to the state and your communities and a tribute to you and your commitment to building healthy community.

You affirmed the program in so many ways — its impact on you as individuals. At every alum workshop I heard things like "we wouldn't have done it but for the Blandin program;" "I went through the program 15 years ago and still go back to the workbook;" and "I used my Blandin!"

And, of course, community impact, including comments such as: "We were about to lose the hospital but we got Blandin alums together and we turned it around" and "the joint powers agreement is a direct result of the program;" and "we would not have the new community center if we didn't have the BCLP team."

Yes, we are grateful and honored, but also indebted and being with you again recharged us.

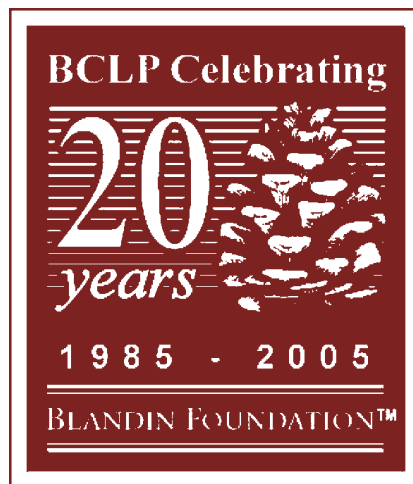
It became obvious that you are great resources to your communities and your regions and that BCLP needs to provide more support to alums to grow and work together. In other words, it simply isn't enough to reconnect and recharge every twenty years or so!

The *Rural Pulse* and the work you did at the workshops indicate that many — if not most issues and opportunities — transcend individual communities. This raises a strategic question about how we as a foundation help you work on a regional and statewide basis.

I am in awe of the talented trainers, past and present, who have given their wisdom, skill and passion to this program.

After 20 years I am still humbled to be in the presence of our participants who, through countless hours of hard work and leadership, make healthy communities possible.

Jim Krile





## Rochester Civic Leader to Chair Foundation Foundation board names George Thompson, BCLP Alum

George B. Thompson, a 1997 Blandin Community Leadership Program (BCLP) alum, was named Chair of the Blandin Foundation Board of Trustees at the board's December, 2005 meeting.

Thompson, 63, participated in BCLP shortly after he joined

the board, and, according to Jim Hoolihan, president of the Foundation, "is a strong advocate of our leadership programs."

"George's own experience as a BCLP participant affirms his commitment to community leadership development, Hoolihan said. "And his commitment to community is deep and strong."

Until December of 2005, Thompson, 63, was the executive director of The Diversity Council of Rochester Minnesota, a position he has held since 1995. The Diversity Council is a community-focused, community-led, volunteer supported organization where the mission is to "create an inclusive and welcoming community through education." (See: [www.diversitycouncil.org](http://www.diversitycouncil.org))

Thompson succeeds Kenneth Lundgren of Grand Rapids. Lundgren, also a BCLP alum, became board chair in 2003 and has been on the board since 1996. Of Lundgren, Hoolihan said: "We owe a great debt to Ken for his leadership through major Foundation transitions."

Thompson said that his commitment to the Foundation's mission – to strengthen rural Minnesota communities, especially the Grand Rapids area – is solid.

"The Foundation's rural leadership development programs,

its engagement in public policy and its commitment of grants in the Grand Rapids area are essential to our vision of healthy communities," Thompson said. "Healthy communities are diverse and grounded in strong economies where the burdens and benefits are widely shared."

A long-time Rochester resident, Thompson was an industrial engineer and manufacturing manager at IBM Corp. in Rochester from 1968 through 1994, after which he joined the Private Industry Council of Rochester until joining the diversity council.

A native of Saint Louis, MO, Thompson graduated from Washington University, Saint Louis, Mo, in 1967 with a Bachelor of Science degree in industrial management. In 2005 he earned a masters degree in education from the University of Minnesota.

Thompson has long been involved in the community and has held positions on several community, state and national boards, including United Way Director (12 years); Jobs in Transition; YMCA Big Brothers; Vice President of Rochester Human Rights Commission; Citizens Youth Violence Intervention Council (CYVIC); Family Action Collaboration Educational Services (FACES); Greater Rochester Area University Center (GRAUC); Mayor's Community Response team; NIOT (Not In Our Town) Steering team; 21<sup>st</sup> Century Partnership steering, diversity and process teams; Youth Commission, NAACP and neighborhood block captain and member of his church board. He was an advisor to the Rochester Neighborhood Association and the District #535 Cultural Diversity Committee to the School Board.

Thompson has received numerous awards in the community as well. He has received the Mayor's Medal of Honor, NAACP 1999 & 2001 award for Community Service and Indo-American award for Public Service. He was appointed to University of Minnesota Rochester Advisory Committee and the University of Minnesota Extension Advisory Committee.

## Notable Leader continued.

Johanna said. "I knew in my heart it was my turn to welcome people to their new lives in Pelican."

The heart is a powerful source of motivation for Johanna. Colleagues who nominated her as a notable BCLP leader frequently mentioned her deep conviction about whatever she did and her particular passion for Pelican Rapids' newest settlers. One colleague, in fact, talked about Johanna as "the keeper of the heart" in the community.

When she heard that description, Johanna quickly tried to distance herself from the compliment, but then commented that when she feels deeply about something, it is impossible for her not to act

or to speak with others about the importance of what needs doing. "I've learned over the years that when I hear myself say, 'This is important. Why isn't someone doing something about it?' I am talking to myself."

*"BCLP helped me discover a sense of my own leadership," Johanna says, "nurturing and inspiring me beyond my self-doubt. I have come to realize that I may not be perfect, but I can do something."*

Johanna's experience at the trailer park as well as her involvement in the leadership program gave new energy to her involvement in the Multicultural Committee. She volunteered for that committee about the same time she applied to be part of the Leadership Program.

## Notable Leader continued...

The Multicultural Committee served important functions as the community learned to welcome strangers into its midst. The committee worked diligently to keep communication accurate so that gossip and rumors did not take on a life of their own. It also provided a forum, where people on all sides of issues, could voice their concerns and fears. Perhaps, most significantly, the Multicultural Committee with Johanna's leadership created a befriending program that linked established members of the community in one-to-one relationships with new comers to help navigate many of their challenges and needs as they settled into community life.

As individual relationships developed, there were also community-wide efforts to foster and sustain mutual understanding. The BCLP cohort from Pelican Rapids in which Johanna was a member sponsored "The Longest Coffee Break," a day when people could gather anywhere up and down main street for a cup of good coffee and conversations with neighbors, old and new. That event eventually became "The International Coffee Break," which in 1998, became the International Friendship Festival that just celebrated its eighth year.

But when one leads from the heart, there is never a time to rest on one's laurels. Most recently, the Multicultural Committee turned its attention to developing youth leadership. Johanna is co-advisor to a community youth board whose purpose is to give youth a voice.

"I am aware of my own experience of finding my voice through the Multicultural Committee, the Economic Development Committee, leadership in my church, and other volunteer activities," Johanna said. "Now I have a chance to help young people find theirs."

The new youth board recruits youngsters from across the community spectrum as leaders for the future. For Johanna, the success of this effort also requires encouraging "the community to come alongside the youth."

The importance of community support in forming young people for leadership became apparent as the new youth board looked for a place to hold a multicultural dance. Organizations with the right sort of facilities for such an event turned down requests because of liability concerns. "This has made me think of the bigger question," Johanna said. "Who is liable for the youth of Pelican Rapids, for helping them become the future they represent?" With that concern clearly in focus (and in her heart), Johanna has been using her networks in town to raise awareness of the whole

community's responsibility for supporting, mentoring, and encouraging youth in their development as citizens.

Johanna's story of leadership reflects the influence of many factors. Her own upbringing taught her values that oriented her to service for the common good. She speaks gently and with deep conviction about the significance of her religious faith in cultivating ideals that guide the decisions she makes. Johanna speaks fondly of her deceased father-in-law, Art Christianson, and the mentoring he provided her about community life. She is also eloquent about her BCLP involvement.

"Participating in BCLP came as I was starting to take on significant leadership in my congregation in addition to working on other community projects. It was a challenge to find balance. One of the things BCLP taught me was to be selective – not just to say yes to invitations but to choose to

do those things that had meaning for me." BCLP also encouraged in Johanna the spirit of the "reflective practitioner." Her BCLP cohort members from Pelican Rapids helped her grapple with issues of balance and were a great sounding board for her ideas. They were also the first people she could turn to as she worked on projects closest to her heart, like the Multicultural Committee.

"BCLP helped me discover a sense of my own leadership," Johanna says, "nurturing and inspiring me beyond my self-doubt. I have come to realize that I may not be perfect, but I

can do something. BCLP held me accountable to act. There is always a tendency to assume there are others more qualified to take action. My participation in BCLP taught me that a person is here for the right time and place. My fellow BCLP friends and Jim Krile have been companions along the way, giving me courage to stay at the work. I have learned that my contribution to the community matters."

How might Johanna encourage others like her who are "willing to make a difference" for their communities? She would likely start with what her colleagues from Pelican Rapids say about her: "Listen to your heart." She would also emphasize being attentive to what is the right thing to do, and that comes from allowing your deepest values to form and empower your sense of service. Johanna would include in her list of suggestions for community leadership the importance of the question, "Who is my neighbor?" These



Johanna and friends busy baking for one of their community events.



## Blandin Rural Pulse fuels news and workshops

When the Foundation issued the *Rural Pulse* survey in June 2005, it was headlined in most newspapers, including metro and regional dailies; it was aired by nearly all broadcast media from every region and corner of the state from WCCO to KAXE.

Minnesota Public Radio (MPR), aired an interview with Jim Krile and he was a guest on *Almanac*, the statewide public affairs television program. The *Grand Rapids Herald Review* banner headline said June 15:

### “Survey says...It’s about jobs.”

Getting those headlines and air time was important – it brought statewide focus to what Blandin Community Leadership Program (BCLP) alums as community leaders are concerned about.

“The *Rural Pulse* represented the collective voice of BCLP alums from around the state,” said Jim Hoolihan, president of the Foundation. “It told the state what’s important and vital to all of us in rural Minnesota.”

About 1,700 BCLP alums participated in the survey, which was conducted in April and May of 2005.

According to the survey, local business development that includes household supporting wages ranks as the most critical rural community issue.

Eighty-nine percent (89%) of respondents indicated that local business development is the most urgent issue that needs to be addressed by rural communities. Of that 89 percent, 52 percent said “attracting businesses to my region”

is most important; 26 percent said “retaining existing businesses” is most important and 11 percent said “supporting local entrepreneurs.”

In citing business development as the most critical issue, the survey indicated several specific development goals including economic diversity, funding for business development, downtown revitalization, high-speed Internet availability and support for small businesses and family farms.

“Increasing the number of jobs that pay household supporting wages and benefits that support families and retain young people comes through loud and clear,” said Jim Krile, director of the Blandin leadership programs.

The other critical issues alum want to address include:

- The increasing cost of health care and insurance and accessible quality care (35 percent of total responses)
- Quality K-12 education (34 percent of total responses)
- Reducing illegal drug use (26 percent of total responses).

The survey was analyzed during the eight alumni workshops held throughout the state from June through November as part of the BCLP 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary observation.

The survey was sent to 3,712 BCLP alumni, yielding a response rate of 46 percent. Just over half of respondents lived in towns under 10,000. About one-third lived in towns with 500 to 5,000 populations and another third lived in towns from 5,001 to 20,000. Ninety-five percent of respondents identified themselves as white with two percent identifying themselves as American Indian/Alaskan Native, however, in the northwest region nine percent of respondents were American Indian/Alaskan native. One percent identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino.

For copies of the *Rural Pulse* contact Jim Krile at the Foundation, [jfkrile@blandinfooundation.org](mailto:jfkrile@blandinfooundation.org)

“Alums are proud of their communities,” Krile said. “In fact, 92 percent of them recommend their communities as a good place to live – and they have a record of working hard to strengthen their communities – which is a powerful affirmation of them and their communities.”

## Notable Leader continued.

are the qualities and strengths her friends and neighbors in Pelican Rapids recognize in her. At the same time, Johanna would be the first to say that community leadership is always challenging. She knows fear in the face of opposition or in taking stands that are not popular. She knows discouragement and fatigue and the stress that comes from trying to balance family life and community commitments.

What is clear to Johanna, however, is that whether speaking about strengths or challenges, community leadership is not something a person possesses on her or his own or does solo. Johanna’s story of leadership couldn’t be told without the love, support, and understanding she receives from her

husband Jim and their three children. That story takes on depth from the networks of friends and colleagues who work together on issues affecting the common good in Pelican Rapids. Conviction, compassion, and companions with a shared sense of vision form the soil for effective community leadership. It is there that Johanna Christianson is planted.

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Blandin Foundation  
100 N. Pokegama Avenue  
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## The Community Leadership Handbook

By Jim Krile, Gordy Curphy, and Duane Lund

Starting in late February all BCLP alums will be able to get a complimentary copy of the Community Leadership Handbook. The leadership tools found in this book, which range from Community Problem Analysis to Building Effective Community Teams, are based on the materials used in the Blandin Foundation's leadership programs. The community examples used come from the real-life leadership experiences of BCLP participants.

All BCLP alumni will receive a note from us saying that the book is available along with an order form to receive your complimentary copy. **If you would like to order today, please email us at [book@blandinfoundation.org](mailto:book@blandinfoundation.org). Please make sure you give us your most current home mailing address.** Additional copies of the handbook can be purchased from the publisher Fieldstone Alliance at [www.fieldstonealliance.org](http://www.fieldstonealliance.org) (1-800-274-6024).

