

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY.

The Newspaper of the Nonprofit World

Volume XXII, No. III • November 4, 2010

GIVING

A Foundation Focuses on Leadership Training to Aid Rural America

By Suzanne Perry

Hinckley, Minn.

The area surrounding Mille Lacs Lake in central Minnesota, like many rural regions across the country, is grappling with the fallout of the economic downturn. The unemployment rate in Mille Lacs County stood at 10.6 percent in August, the second-worst in the state. The county's per capita income was \$26,811 in 2008, far below the state average.

In addition, the region has seen many years of bitter court battles—and racial tensions—over the treaty rights of the Mille Lacs Band, an Ojibwe Indian tribe with a reservation on the lake.

“There’s so much conflict, it’s impacting education, health care, and the local economy,” says Mary Sam, a community-college administrator and human-rights activist.

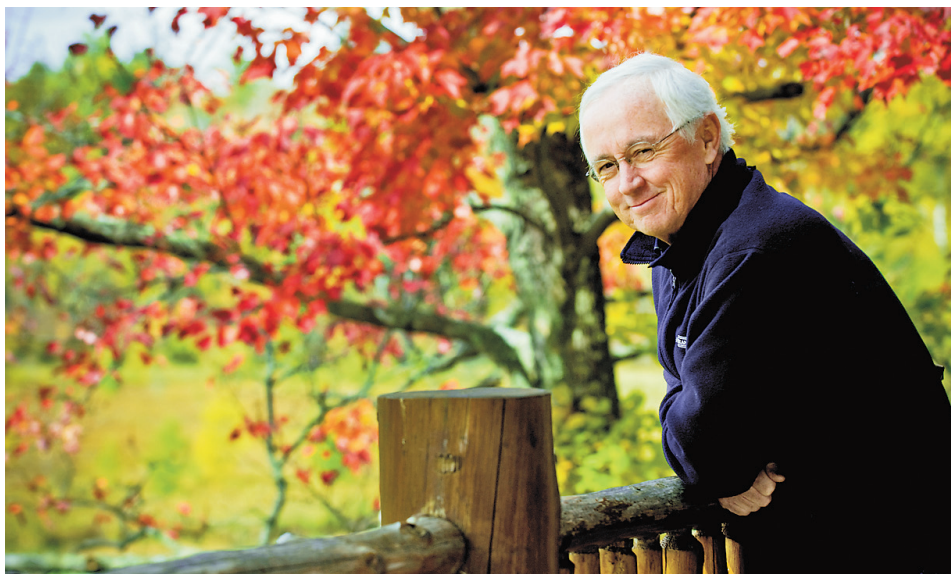
In the face of these challenges, Ms. Sam, a member of the Mille Lacs Band, was looking for a way to inspire people from around the large lake to work together to solve the region’s problems.

She turned to the Blandin Foundation, in Grand Rapids, Minn., which has operated a program for almost 25 years that helps rural Minnesotans become effective community leaders.

Working with tribal leaders, she crafted an application that was submitted by the Mille Lacs Area Human Rights Commission for a slot in the Blandin Community Leadership Program. The foundation agreed—and her region won a chance this year to join more than 5,600 people from more than 370 rural areas in Minnesota that have been trained in the Blandin method.

Saving Farmers

Blandin, one of the nation’s few private foundations that focus exclusively on helping rural areas, developed its community-leadership program on the philosophy that an effective way to strengthen a town or region is to throw together a diverse group of residents and teach them



DAVE BJERK. COURTESY OF THE BLANDIN FOUNDATION



Jim Hoolihan, chief executive of the Blandin Foundation, says grooming effective community leaders is essential to promoting social change. Participants in a recent leadership-training program (left) sponsored by Blandin posted their aspirations for their communities on a bulletin board.

techniques for getting things done.

That approach has inspired other efforts, for example the Ford Institute for Community Building, a project of the Ford Family Foundation, in Roseburg, Ore.

“We borrowed their curriculum rather liberally,” says Tom Gallagher, the institute’s director. He says the foundation was looking for a way to help towns that lost timber jobs in the 1990s after the northern spotted owl was declared an endangered species and logging activities were curtailed.

The Blandin Foundation, created in 1941 by Charles K. Blandin, former owner of a paper mill and the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* and *St. Paul Dispatch*, offers grants

and programs to help rural Minnesota in areas like economic development, affordable housing, broadband networks, and job training.

It started the Blandin Community Leadership Program in 1985, at a time when Minnesota farmers were losing their livelihoods due to the Midwest farm crisis and iron mines in the north were facing an economic slowdown—and it wanted to find a way to put the distressed regions on a firmer setting, says Jim Hoolihan, the foundation’s chief executive.

“For lasting change and improvement, it would take more than money, it would take more than just grants,” he says. “What’s necessary for sustainable change? The answer was leadership.”

The foundation turned to the Center for Creative Leadership, a training program in Greensboro, N.C., which was geared to business leaders—and adapted the model to serve rural communities.

Mr. Hoolihan says the “secret sauce” in Blandin’s recipe is diversity—bringing together people of different ages, professions, races, and viewpoints and a balance between men and women. In Ms. Sam’s case, that meant joining a group of more than 20 people ages 24 to 77, from a handful of towns around the 200-square-mile lake, including two conservation officers for the Mille Lacs Band, a lawyer, three pastors, several educators, and a mental-health therapist. It also included Karrie Roeschlein, the city clerk for Wahkon, which is contesting the boundaries of the Mille Lacs Band’s reservation.

The group spent five days at a residential training program at a Grand Rapids resort in February; followed by a two-day workshop at a casino hotel operated by the Mille Lacs Band in Hinckley, Minn., in May; and a final day at a resort in Onamia, Minn., in August to wrap things up. Their veteran outside trainers, Ann Glumac and Victor Klimoski, led them through exercises designed to get them to think strategically about how to achieve a goal.

The sessions were sometimes difficult for Ms. Roeschlein, who says the group exercises and the contact with people like Ms. Sam left her with conflicting feelings about the battles over Indian sovereignty.

“In my heart, I want harmony,” she says. “But I also want a job. So where is my line?”

Learning to Collaborate

The trainers did not discuss the racial conflicts but focused on getting the participants to think about ways to work together to build a healthier community. (Mr. Klimoski says Blandin is considering developing a program, however, that more directly focuses on hostilities that can arise in “border communities,” or those adjoining an Indian reservation.)

Ms. Sam says she was delighted by the outcome: “A lot of barriers were broken down,” she says. “A lot of relationships have been established.”

Responding to the deaths of several young Mille Lacs Band members in recent months, participants agreed to promote efforts around the lake to combat gang violence, she says. Over the summer, a member of the Blandin group, Kevin Armbrust, directed a play that brought together students from a tribal school with students from two other school districts.

And 13 of the Mille Lacs alumni gathered in September, and agreed to meet every other month to share information and “try to get a network of support and camaraderie,” Ms. Roeschlein says.

One of the participants volunteered to send regular e-mails to all of the Mille Lacs Blandin alumni keeping them abreast of activities and events around the lake, she says. “Our lake is our gem,” Ms. Roeschlein says. “We need to be together on things.”

‘Star’ Graduate

Blandin, which has an endowment of \$309-million and a 2010 budget of \$18.6-million, will spend \$2.4-million this year on its leadership programs.

Blandin intentionally separates the leadership program from its grant-making activities because it does not want participants to be motivated by the possibility of winning money, Mr. Hoolihan says.

It relies heavily on alumni to help select future participants and otherwise keep the program alive in their communities. One of their “star” graduates is Bonnie Rietz, a civic activist and former mayor and city council member in Austin, Minn., who now serves on Blandin’s board.

Ms. Rietz participated in the community-leadership program in 1988, when Austin was bitterly divided over a recent strike at the Hormel meatpacking plant, the town’s largest employer. Ms. Rietz recalls that two of the participants—a Hormel vice president and a labor-union officer—were not speaking to each other at the time. But they became good friends, which “made a big difference in those years as those contracts were settled,” she says.

Since then, Austin has participated in six subsequent leadership-training sessions, though the issues facing the city have changed. For example, the city now is grappling with diversity because of an influx of Hispanic and Sudanese workers at the Hormel plant, Ms. Rietz says. Some of the Blandin alumni have started projects when they returned to Austin—including one called Spruce Up Austin, to beautify the city, she says.

Other graduates have also created programs. Alumni from Hibbing and Chisholm, in northern Minnesota, worked with the Hibbing Area Chamber of Commerce to develop a program to train leaders and promote cooperation between communities in the Central Iron Range region. In Pelican Rapids, in central Minnesota, they devised projects to welcome immigrants and created an International Friendship Festival.

But, Ms. Rietz says, “by far the greater impact on the community is the fact that you have 24 leaders trained, and those 24 leaders come back and are working in 24 different areas.”

Ms. Rietz now keeps two lists: one of potential Blandin leadership-training participants and another of alumni who can be tapped when a community project beckons and “it would be good to have those skills sitting around the table.”

Ingredients for Social Change: Lessons From a Philanthropy's Coaching Sessions

The Blandin Foundation's formula for training community leaders in rural areas relies on several key principles.

One is that anyone can be a leader—leadership is not something that requires an official title. Another is that rural residents do not usually need outside help to keep their communities healthy; they can bring people together on their own to solve local problems.

But the Blandin Community Leadership Program, operated by the northern Minnesota foundation, is also based on the idea that there is an art to effective leadership, and it involves three fundamental tools:

- Defining an issue in a way that will lead to effective action.
- Creating social capital—developing and maintaining relationships with people who can help bring about change.
- Pulling together enough people, money, and other resources to achieve a specific result.

Blandin's program—which outlines specific attributes of a healthy community, such as economic opportunity and environmental stewardship—uses discussions, exercises, and games to help participants think about how to select a problem to tackle. Those efforts also help participants identify the people, organizations, resources, and money that would be assets, as well as the potential obstacles; assess who would be affected by their efforts and how they would react; and measure progress.

For example, one exercise asks participants to imagine they are members of a committee that is trying to help pass a school-bond referendum. The trainers scatter 12 large squares on the floor that have certain skills or abilities printed on them—for example, public relations, accounting, and links to school boards or state agencies. They then ask participants to stand on the square that matches their qualifications. If there are gaps in the abilities that would be needed to form an effective committee, they then consider whether they can fill those from beyond the group.

One member who participated in a training program for the Mille Lacs area of Minnesota earlier this year—Linda Osburn, a lawyer—says she learned from the Blandin exercises the importance of describing an issue in the right way.

For example, she said, advocates of a controversial proposal to consolidate two school systems in her area should use the term “school collaboration” instead of “school consolidation.”

“It's not getting rid of something,” she says, “it's bringing out the best we have.”

New Approaches

Research shows that the training changes the way the participants approach community problems. For example, the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, in St. Paul, in 2009 surveyed 235 alumni of the Blandin Community Leadership Program and a related program that trains leaders on Indian reservations.

When describing their leadership activities, 76 percent of the alumni said they often or very often identified their community's key assets, up from 26 percent before the training; 74 percent said they listened to others and gave them a voice on community issues, up from 26 percent; and 63 percent said they worked to cultivate the strengths of other people, up from 12 percent.

One element that is critical to the community-leadership program's success, foundation officials and trainers say, is an initial five-day immersion session, in which participants spend intensive time with each other away from their communities and jobs.

The group stays at a resort, an effort to reinforce the idea that participants have as much leadership potential as chief executives or board members who might spend time in such fancy digs, says Bill Mease, who has worked as an outside trainer for the Blandin program for more than 20 years.

The philosophy is that “everybody's a leader,” he says. “Our job is just to take the rust off.”

Participants also deepen their connections after five days of eating together, doing exercises, and playing games.

“There becomes a fluency in how they talk with one another that doesn't happen in a three-hour workshop,” says Victor Klimoski, a Blandin trainer. “I'm always surprised at people who say, This is the first time in my life I've had this kind of conversation with people.”

—Suzanne Perry