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VITAL enrichment

Foundation grant partners develop valued educational tool

When Sarah Rutherford does homework, she doesn't just crack the books — she clicks the mouse. The soon-to-be junior from Greenway High School completed her first online course, Health and Wellness, this past school year as an enrollee of the Virtual Itasca Area Academy of Learning (VITAL), an online learning community created by eight area school districts. She and the other 400-plus VITAL enrollees opened a new chapter in their education that allows for more flexible schedules and enhanced academic and life skills.

"I love being able to work at my own pace and get help when I need it," said Rutherford, who does her VITAL classwork online outside of school hours, and often works ahead when she has free time.

Retooling school

Changes in education were the catalyst for creating VITAL. Four years ago, the Itasca Area Schools Collaborative (IASC) began exploring ways to strengthen course offerings in the face of declining funding and enrollment. The group had successfully operated an interactive television network and believed Internet-based classes were the next frontier of education.

IASC administrators and teachers researched Minnesota's online education landscape, and decided to become a state-certified online course provider, offering accelerated, credit-recovery and vocational courses that enhance IASC districts' offerings.

"We firmly believed, and continue to believe, that students benefit from continuing attendance at their home district with online courses enhancing their educational opportunities," said Jo McClure, VITAL's program director, who served on the research team.

Two key factors helped IASC reach its objective: a carefully managed growth strategy, and a \$525,000, three-year grant from the Blandin Foundation.

"Funding from the Blandin Foundation allowed us to move forward into uncharted waters," said Mike Doro, superintendent at Remer-Northland schools and president of IASC. "Without the funding, it would have been very difficult to make headway."

Logging in catches on

VITAL launched in September 2005. The student's home district pays the tuition if the online course is part of the student's regular school day, allowing the district to keep control of its "Average Daily Membership," which determines state funding. VITAL cannot confer degrees, so students graduate from their home schools.

Growth has been almost exponential, with 180 enrollees, including 64 from outside IASC districts, participating in 2006-07, and 433 enrollees in 2007-08. Course offerings have increased from six in 2005 to 28 this year; 2008-09 projections are 1,000 educational

enrollees and 54 course offerings. While some courses and accompanying software are purchased, about 70 percent of the classes have been developed by local VITAL educators.

Plugged-in educators are the key, said McClure. Many VITAL teachers also are employed at area school districts; their online work, from developing curriculum to responding to student questions and grading work, is done on their own time. They are passionate about technology, and about using best practices to help all students. Many have found that teaching online courses enhances their traditional classroom teaching.

"In an online course, a teacher hears more about what the student is thinking," said Diane Levar, who teaches multimedia art and design for VITAL. "Because I have appreciated these insights online, I have redefined the sketchbook assignments in my

classroom courses to include more writing, so students reflect on their 'thinking about their thinking,' during the creative process in art."

"I had to think of different ways online enrollees could complete basically the same assignments," said Kari Torgerson, Health and Wellness teacher for VITAL. "This thinking outside the box made me technology-conscious, and I've embedded many of those same technological methods in my face-to-face class."

VITAL educators also enjoy the opportunity to assist students of all abilities.

"Learning math online does pose unique challenges...[but] it is a great option for students who need credit recovery, or who want to take an extra

VITAL enrichment, cont. on page 2



Sarah Rutherford, a sophomore at Greenway high school, completed VITAL's Health and Wellness course, doing homework and activities at home as her schedule allowed.



Mission
To strengthen communities in rural Minnesota, especially the Grand Rapids area

Vision
Healthy rural communities grounded in strong economies where the burdens and benefits are widely shared



Grants profile

Circles of Support

Connecting to move out of poverty

“People in the community not meeting their full potential — that is economic development in the community that is not being realized,” said Jim Woehrle associate director of KOOTASCA Community Action.

Woehrle understands the dynamics and community costs of poverty and the unmet potential it creates through his work with KOOTASCA, a nonprofit human services agency working to end poverty for citizens in Koochiching and Itasca Counties. He has seen first-hand the stresses that poverty places on families and children and the financial drain it places on local education systems and entire social services networks.

Poverty today is not the view of poverty held by the post-World War II generation. Today’s poor are too frequently the working poor — often families and children trapped with sub-living wage incomes, which can create a seemingly endless cycle where even basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter are a financial challenge. The 2004 report, *Working Hard, Falling Short*, written on behalf of the Working Poor Families Project notes that one in four working families nationally is a low-income household.

Locally, however, there is a program making a positive difference for those in poverty. Circles of Support is a KOOTASCA initiative that partners persons in poverty with a community “ally” not in poverty. The net result is that those in poverty have access to community resources, networks and systems once out of reach.

Circles participants are not currently in a crisis, such as homelessness or

addiction. They also must demonstrate willingness to work and the ability to set and meet goals for themselves. Allies are not in poverty and must demonstrate leadership skills and emotional stability to participate.

Becky LaPlant has been a volunteer Circles ally for about two years, for two different participants. She also is a member of the Public Policy and Engagement staff for Blandin Foundation.

Through her personal involvement with Circles of Support, LaPlant has seen that poverty is something that can happen to anyone. A medical crisis, financial crisis or even a divorce can put almost anyone into poverty, she says.

“It’s very difficult to get out of poverty once you are in,” she said. “The system for getting out is broken.”

Alice Miller, workforce development manager with Circles of Support, notes that the Circles connections are confidence builders, a potential reference on a job application, access to leaders in the community who can really affect change at the community level and a hand up for those who want to get out of poverty.

Being an ally can mean affecting change at the community level or just one Circles participant at a time.

LaPlant recently supported her participant, Briana Anderson, through the daunting process of securing financial aid to return to school. That participant will soon be attending a local community college as a non-traditional student.



Nathan Wright, financial aid director at Itasca Community College, discusses financial aid opportunities with Briana Anderson (center), and Becky LaPlant. Anderson plans to pursue a degree in business administration starting this fall.

In the end, say those associated with Circles, it all comes down to the ability to have a friend and be a friend.

“Circles works the way it works in life,” said Miller. “It’s about knowing somebody, having somebody who will put in a good word for you, having more knowledge to tap into than you had on your own.”

“If you can be a friend, you can be an ally,” said LaPlant. “And, if you have the ability to give to people, why wouldn’t you do that?”

KOOTASCA Circles of Support is financially supported, in part, by the Blandin Foundation, through its fairness and opportunity grantmaking focus. In addition, in 2007, Blandin Foundation staff provided 310 hours of volunteer service, during working hours, for a broad range of community projects.

VITAL enrichment, continued from cover

course on their own time,” said Karen Teff, who teaches online algebra.

Digital-age skill development

Students and teachers agree that online learning requires a significant investment of time and provides important opportunities to learn academic content and life skills. McClure encourages students considering online learning to take only one or two online classes per semester.

“You need to be very self-disciplined to take an online class,” said Sarah Rutherford, the Greenway student. “There will not be someone there every minute to make you do your assignments. You must take it upon yourself to complete them and turn them in on time.”

In July, VITAL is set to grow again, through a merger with MnCOLA, an online learning organization based in Brainerd. McClure sees this as a merger of equals, as both organizations share similar beliefs about how online learning can enhance curricular opportunities, and have worked collaboratively to share resources and course offerings since their inception. This new organization, called “INFINITY: Minnesota’s Digital Academy,” now

includes 40 school districts and continues to expand to serve rural schools throughout the state.

That’s the kind of news Wade Fauth likes to hear. As grants director for the Blandin Foundation, it’s his job to evaluate proposed projects.

“I’ve been blown away by their success,” Fauth said. “They’re on the verge of doing what they said they’d do — create a strong regional online educational

option — and more. And they’re finding ways to reach out and leverage their strengths to keep it going.”

The Blandin Foundation awarded VITAL a three-year grant in 2005 to provide funding to develop curriculum and for other start-up and initial operating activities. The grant was part of the Foundation’s educational attainment grantmaking focus. For more information, visit the INFINITY web site: mninfinity.org.



VITAL will merge July 1 with a Brainerd-based online learning organization to create INFINITY, a digital academy projected to serve 1,000 students in the upcoming school year.



BLANDIN FOUNDATION™

The “At Home” report to the community is published periodically by the Blandin Foundation and distributed to residents of the Grand Rapids area, its home community. Contributors include:

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Leadership *profile*

Blackduck

Weaving a welcoming community

Get out a road map of Minnesota and you'll find the community of Blackduck positioned far north, far from any major metropolitan area.

If you *only* look at a map, Blackduck might seem to be a typical, small homogeneous Midwestern town. A visit, however, reveals a community rising to meet the challenges and opportunities of growing ethnic diversity within its borders.

Blackduck, a regional center of about 2,000 residents, is located near the

Leech Lake and Red Lake Indian reservations, which accounts for some of its diversity. Another driver is the town's major employer, Anderson Fabrics, which makes custom products for the interior design industry. As Anderson Fabrics has added employees, Blackduck's Hispanic population has grown greatly in the past three years, with a peak influx of 55-60 Hispanic workers.

As new residents entered, the Blackduck community collectively began to realize a need to better reach

out to its new, diverse neighbors as well as to the Native Americans who already resided there.

"It's kind of unexpected in a town of this size to have as much diversity as there is," said Nance Kunkel, librarian at the Blackduck Public Library. "We wanted the whole community to seem welcoming."

There were challenges, however, to be overcome in the quest to create a more welcoming community. Among these was the language barrier; many of the incoming Hispanics had limited knowledge and proficiency in English.

Community leaders embarked on several endeavors to break down language barriers. English as Second Language (ESL) courses are offered right at Anderson Fabrics. Spanish literacy training improves the reading and writing skills of the new residents and thus makes learning English easier. A new section has been created in the public library, funded through federal grant dollars, with bilingual materials and information on living in the United States.

The community also needed ways to connect its diverse populations together. To this end, Blackduck officials enlisted the help of the Blandin Foundation's Partners In Leadership (PIL) program, designed to help communities

identify and work across cultural differences. Leaders also developed plans to bring diverse populations together through a community garden.

The net result has been increased networking opportunities and the building of new relationships between old and new residents, said Heidi Heisler, Blackduck community coordinator.

"People that didn't used to talk to each other more than to say 'hi' are now visiting," said Sharon Tuey, Community Education coordinator. "It's breaking down those barriers."

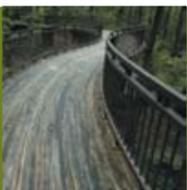
"The training isn't just limited to understanding Latino or Native American culture," added Heisler. "It's giving people a broader perspective to deal with all kinds of diversity - ethnic, socio-economic and others."

The efforts that have taken place in 2007 and 2008 in Blackduck will certainly have a role in the work of a recently formed 2020 Committee, which is helping craft a long-range vision for a richer and more diverse Blackduck community, said Heisler.

Blackduck is a participant city in the Blandin Foundation's Partners in Leadership training program, which helps communities identify and work across cultural differences. Both Blackduck's established and emerging leaders continue to participate in PIL, with training sessions completed in May. The Blandin Foundation also awarded a two-year grant to the city of Blackduck in 2007 to help fund Spanish literacy training, the development of a community garden and provide diversity training.



Employees at Anderson Fabrics participated in the Blackduck Partners In Leadership program. These included, from left, front row: Carolyn Fisher, Erica Rivera, Miriam Osborn, Nina Anderson, Vicki Juelson. Back row, from left: Karita Strong, Erick Cumatz, Steve Cochems, Violet King, Deb Larsen. The company makes custom products for the interior design industry.



Scholarships *profile*

Mary Jo Gibbons

Passion, combined with early Foundation resources, powered an education in science

Charles K. Blandin was a bright businessman, accomplishing great feats during his lifetime and leaving a lasting legacy through his foundation. He began working as a child, was self-educated, rose through the ranks of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, eventually owning the paper and then the Blandin Paper Company.

But Mr. Blandin never was able to access one thing he held in great esteem: a college degree.

Despite his own lack of higher education, in 1956 Mr. Blandin set his sights on the promise of two local women whom he felt would benefit from college. It was Mary Jo Gagnon (now Gibbons) and Betty Maxwell who received the very first scholarships from the Blandin Foundation, now the Foundation's longest-running program.

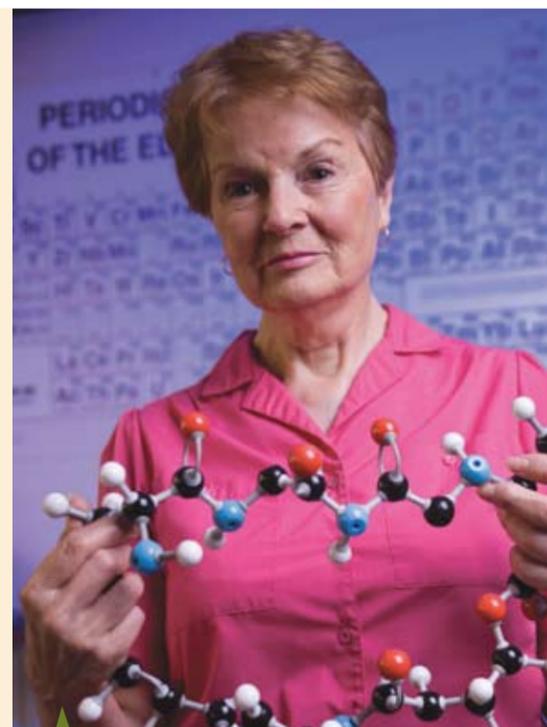
Fifty-two years later, Mary Jo Gibbons lives in Itasca County with her husband, Dr. Peter Gibbons, and describes her education as critical and that scholarship as life-changing. In a recent letter, she wrote:

"I had finished two years of college at 'IJC' [now Itasca Community College] and was planning to transfer to St. Scholastica in Duluth to continue my study in medical technology. But I had very little money left in my savings. My father, a former Blandin employee, had died after a long illness the year I graduated from high school in 1954. My mother was working as a bookkeeper to keep the bills paid. I can still remember the overwhelming awe and relief I felt when I received the news that the Blandin Foundation would be financing my next two years at St. Scholastica.

"It was incredible. I graduated in 1958 with a Bachelor of Science degree in medical technology and minors in chemistry and biology. I am forever grateful."

Surely Mr. Blandin would be proud.

More than 17,000 area youth have received Education Awards totaling more than \$15 million since 1956. In 2007, the Education Awards program was focused even more intentionally on students with lower family incomes. For program details and the video stories of how other local students have used education to develop life opportunities, visit www.BlandinFoundation.org.



Area resident and 1954 Grand Rapids graduate Mary Jo (Gagnon) Gibbons dreamed of an education in science and medical technology, despite financial challenges. She was the first of 17,000 local students who have partnered with the Blandin Foundation to make their dreams come true.

Sharing progress

2007 grants infuse community action

For more than a half-century, the Blandin Foundation has been a partner in community-driven activities in the Grand Rapids area and rural Minnesota. Working with people who share the Foundation's mission of strengthening communities, grantmaking efforts move forward projects and programs of all sizes and scopes, giving people here, and throughout the state, the opportunity to enhance their communities.

Grants listed below were awarded between January and December 2007, and were made in the Foundation's six strategic focus areas. Each focus area addresses a unique aspect of rural life, with the common vision of healthy rural communities grounded in strong economies, where burdens and benefits are widely shared. Dark type denotes grants made in the Foundation's home giving area (greater Itasca County). This list does not include grants of \$1,000 or less.

Economic Initiatives

These grants help fund value-added initiatives that leverage community assets, community involvement and new technologies to revitalize our communities in ways unforeseen just a few years ago.

- Deer River Hired Hands \$165,000**
For a recycling and wood processing project in Itasca County
- Depot Commons Association \$38,000**
Project support to initiate a community branding project for the Itasca County area
- Depot Commons Association \$7,500**
Building trades study for Itasca County and northeast Minnesota
- Eagleview Community Foundation \$4,000**
Planning funds for community walking trails in the S. Lake area
- Grand Rapids Economic Development Authority \$1,000,000**
A program-related investment for redevelopment purposes in downtown Grand Rapids
- Itasca Community College \$2,500,000**
Project support to enhance the ICC engineering program and stimulate economic growth
- Itasca Economic Development Corporation . . \$15,000**
For professional grants specialists to advance community and economic development opportunities
- Itasca Economic Development Corporation . . \$4,000**
Support for the Itasca Area Employer Toolkit
- Itasca Technology Exchange \$50,000**
Further develop the concept of a collaborative research and technology program adjacent to Itasca Community College
- Judy Garland Children's Museum \$150,000**
Continued operating support for the Children's Museum
- Minnesota Wood Education Project . . . \$110,500**
Continued support for the Goods from the Woods initiative
- MN Diversified Industries \$100,000**
Continued support to provide employment opportunities for disabled and disadvantaged workers
- MN Diversified Industries \$1,000,000**
Continued support for bridge financing for the Grand Rapids and Hibbing facilities
- NE Entrepreneur Fund, Inc. \$90,000**
Continued support for business planning training and access to financing for unemployed and underemployed people in Itasca County
- North Central MN Farm & Antique Ass'n. . \$10,000**
Capital support to renovate and preserve two historic buildings for educational and cultural purposes in Itasca County
- Northern Itasca Joint Powers Board \$8,500**
To develop a comprehensive plan for the Edge of the Wilderness area
- City of Northome \$5,000**
Technical assistance and business planning for the Northome Industrial Park
- Scenic Highway, Inc. \$100,000**
For a project coordinator to develop the Rabideau Conservation Academy and Learning Center
- United Way of 1000 Lakes \$10,000**
Health and human service needs assessment in Itasca County
- African Development Center \$165,000**
Support to expand capacity into four greater Minnesota communities
- Aitkin County \$10,000**
Research and planning grant for utilizing plasma gasification technology
- Brainerd Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce Education Ass'n. \$50,000**
Develop the Bridges Workplace Connection to business and education
- Cass County Economic Development Corp.. \$2,000**
Membership support to promote economic development in the Remer area
- Dovetail Partners, Inc.. \$50,000**
For an Eco-Affordable Housing program throughout rural Minnesota
- Ely Area Development Council \$50,000**
Continued support to promote local innovation through Project Firefly
- Giziibii Resource Conservation and Development Ass'n.. \$6,300**
Outreach to small private woodland owners to improve management practices
- Greater MN Housing Fund \$750,000**
Support for flood recovery in southeastern Minnesota
- City of Hibbing. \$37,500**
For the Iron Range Community FiberNet initiative
- Home and Community Options, Inc. \$50,000**
Implementation of the LightSpeed high-speed Internet grant program
- City of International Falls \$5,000**
Architectural design of a welcome center in International Falls
- City of Longville. \$5,000**
Support for a teaching and display venue for local artists
- MacCray School District. \$12,000**
Implementation of the LightSpeed high-speed Internet grant program
- Minnesota Forest Resources Council . . . \$100,000**
For the Working Forestland Conservation Initiative
- Minnesota Technology, Inc. \$150,000**
To develop and pilot-test a Business Growth Planning Tool to assist small and medium-sized manufacturing firms
- Minnesota Wood Campaign, Inc.. \$50,000**
Continued support for education and planning
- City of Moose Lake \$8,000**
Year 2 funding for the Get Broadband program
- Univ. of MN Duluth - Natural Resources Research Institute \$150,000**
For a Product Development Fund to enhance economic growth in northeastern Minnesota
- NE Entrepreneur Fund, Inc. \$250,000**
For the Northland Entrepreneur Development System in rural Minnesota

- Northland Institute \$150,000**
To develop a Minnesota Employee Ownership Fund to help increase the number of employee-owned businesses throughout rural Minnesota
- The Northspan Group, Inc.. \$20,000**
Facilitation of the Range Readiness Initiative
- Northwest Regional Dev't. Commission \$25,000**
Worker training initiative
- The People Connection, Inc. \$15,000**
Year 2 implementation of the Get Broadband program
- Redwood Area Communities Foundation . . \$5,000**
Research and exploration for niche energy opportunities and workforce development in the Redwood Falls area
- Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation \$250,000**
For the Business Recovery Fund to assist southeastern Minnesota businesses affected by flooding
- Southwest Minnesota Foundation \$1,250**
Project support to research the feasibility of a cultural event in the Hutchinson area
- University of Minnesota \$15,000**
Project support to continue the Community Assistantship Program
- University of Minnesota \$45,000**
Project support to reduce carbon emissions and increase sequestration in rural Minnesota's forests, farms and other land areas
- White Earth Reservation Tribal Council . . \$200,000**
Capital support to construct a wind turbine as part of the Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency on Tribal Lands project

Educational Attainment

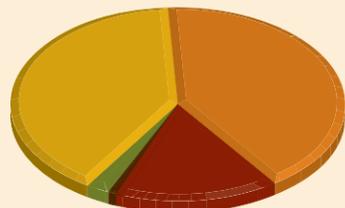
These grants help increase the educational attainment of disadvantaged populations and grow our communities' overall standard of living.

- Education Awards Program \$905,100**
Support for 343 scholarships awarded to students at Itasca County area schools
- City of Calumet \$2,000**
Upgrades for the City of Calumet library computers
- Independent School District 316 \$49,000**
For implementation of Project Lead the Way in Greenway School District
- City of Coleraine \$2,000**
Computer equipment for the Coleraine Public Library
- Independent School District 317 \$40,000**
Project support to implement Project Lead the Way at Deer River High School
- Eagleview Community Foundation \$14,000**
Capital support for the Eagleview Community Technology Center
- Grand Rapids Area Community Foundation . \$5,000**
For online application software for scholarship and Sharing Fund processing
- Grand Rapids Area Community Foundation . \$4,500**
For the Nursing Assistant Class and Certification Loan Program
- Grand Rapids Area Community Foundation . \$10,000**
Support to implement Tracker, a phenology software program, into the 5th grade science curriculum
- Grand Rapids Area Community Foundation . \$9,000**
Support for a scholarship website covering the greater Itasca County area
- Grand Rapids Area Community Foundation . \$16,500**
To bring The Power Team to schools in Itasca County to encourage positive choices and resist negative peer pressure
- Independent School District 318 \$30,000**
Project support for Native American studies class at Grand Rapids High School
- Independent School District 318 \$39,000**
Continued support for Project Read
- Independent School District 318 \$48,290**
Implementation of Project Lead the Way at Grand Rapids High School
- Itasca Area Schools Collaborative . . . \$3,450,000**
Continued support of Invest Early program
- Itasca Community College \$348,000**
Support for financial aid assistance during the 2008-09 academic year
- Itasca Community College \$160,000**
Support for the Applied Learning/College Attainment program focusing on grades 7-14

- Itasca Community College \$12,000**
Capital support to upgrade technology at the ICC computer training lab
- Itasca Economic Development Corporation . \$5,000**
Development of financial literacy presentations and curriculum
- KOOTASCA Community Action. \$5,500**
Support for administrative expenses not covered in the Minnesota Reading Corps contract
- KOOTASCA Community Action. \$3,000**
Support to secure 20 AmeriCorps volunteers to enhance K-3 reading programs at Itasca County area elementary schools
- City of Marble \$2,000**
Funding for two new computers for the Marble Public Library
- Reif Arts Council \$3,650**
Kennedy Center Partners in Education Institute collaboration for teacher training workshops
- Independent School District 118 \$150,000**
Support to provide preschool education in the Remer School District
- Itasca County Historical Society \$90,000**
Sustaining contribution to collect, preserve, interpret and disseminate the history of Itasca County
- Itasca Orchestral Society \$80,000**
Sustaining contribution to provide orchestral music opportunities for youth and adults
- MacRostie Art Center \$70,000**
Sustaining contribution to provide visual arts and educational programming
- Edvisions, Inc. \$147,000**
Project support to expand the Hope Study project in rural school districts, especially those with significant numbers Latino and Native American students
- Growth and Justice \$45,000**
Support for the Rethinking Public Education project to increase the number of students who finish a post-secondary degree program throughout rural Minnesota
- Growth and Justice \$5,000**
Twin Cities Public Television coverage of the education summit "Smart Investments in Minnesota's Students"
- MN Minority Education Partnership, Inc.. \$20,000**
Support to expand college access for low-income and minority populations
- North Shore Trade & Tech Project. \$45,000**
Support to link educational opportunities for North Shore youth and adults to the current workforce needs
- Northland Foundation. \$5,000**
Support of the Regional Kindergarten Transition Summit
- Ready for K. \$150,000**
Continued support to promote and improve school readiness throughout rural Minnesota
- Univ. of MN Duluth \$10,000**
Support to revitalize the Indian Mental Health Training Project

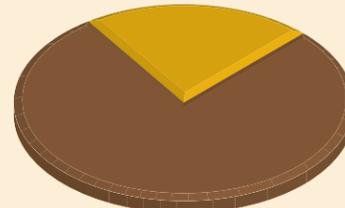
- ElderCircle. \$100,000**
Ongoing support and start-up assistance for an Adult Day Service
- Friends for Animal Welfare \$4,950**
Support for the Itasca Area Nonprofit Guide
- GRACE House \$4,000**
Phase I financial feasibility study of capital and operations for a permanent housing shelter in Grand Rapids
- GRACE House \$80,000**
Operations and planning support for the GRACE House homeless shelter in Grand Rapids
- Grand Rapids Area Community Foundation . \$100,000**
Continued support for the Itasca County Sharing Fund emergency assistance program
- Independent School District 318 \$50,000**
Continued support for the Children First! Initiative
- Independent School District 318 \$78,000**
Continued support for the Step Ahead early childhood education program
- Independent School District 318 \$195,500**
Continued support of Baby Steps Boutique
- City of Grand Rapids. \$3,300**
Children First 2007 New Year's Eve Celebration
- Habitat for Humanity of Itasca County . . \$143,000**
Continued operating support for low-income housing development
- Itasca County Family YMCA \$4,000**
Get Fit Itasca initiative
- Itasca County Health & Human Services . . \$45,000**
For the Kathleen Blatz Recovery Program
- Itasca Hospice Partners. \$10,000**
Needs assessment to determine the feasibility of a hospice house
- KOOTASCA Community Action. \$100,000**
Continued support of the Teenage Parent Program
- KOOTASCA Community Action. \$8,000**
Support for "Bridges Out of Poverty" community training in Grand Rapids
- KOOTASCA Community Action. \$45,000**
Continued support of the Itasca Area Crisis Nursery
- Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe \$1,500**
Children First 2007 New Year's Eve Celebration for the Inger community
- Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe \$1,500**
Children First 2007 New Year's Eve Celebration for the S. Lake community
- Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe \$2,000**
Children First 2007 New Year's Eve Celebration for the Ball Club/Winnie Dam area
- NE MN Office of Job Training \$4,100**
Technical assistance to increase effectiveness for the Itasca County Collaborative
- North Homes Inc.. \$7,000**
Support for implement gender-responsive and restorative justice interventions in the lives of youth in Itasca County
- Northland Counseling Center/Itasca County. \$5,000**
Development of an outdoor complex for Kiesler House in Grand Rapids
- Youth for Christ. \$50,000**
Continued support for the Ground Floor Youth Center in Itasca County
- Action through Churches Together \$60,000**
Sustaining contribution to respond to community issues and expand organizational efforts
- Advocates for Family Peace \$90,000**
Sustaining contribution to promote safety, equity and peace to families experiencing domestic abuse
- Bigfork Valley Hospital \$30,000**
Sustaining contribution for the Home Visitor Program
- Bridges Kinship Mentoring. \$80,000**
Sustaining contribution to provide mentoring opportunities for young people
- Community Cafe. \$50,000**
Sustaining contribution to help reduce hunger
- Cooperative Solutions \$100,000**
Sustaining contribution for mediation services in Itasca County
- First Call for Help of Itasca County. . . . \$90,000**
Sustaining contribution for emergency, information and referral services
- Friendship Ventures \$5,000**
Sustaining contribution for Itasca County disabled youth to participate in camp activities
- Girl Scouts of MN and WI Lakes and Pines. \$20,000**
Sustaining contribution for the Girl Scout program
- Itasca Alliance Against Sexual Assault . . . \$60,000**
Sustaining contribution to provide support and advocacy to victims of sexual violence and prevention education
- Marcell Family Center \$60,000**
Sustaining contribution for family center programming
- MN Special Olympics, Inc. \$60,000**
Sustaining contribution for the Special Olympics program in Itasca County
- Second Harvest North Central Food Bank . \$100,000**
Sustaining contribution for Food Bank operations
- United Way of 1000 Lakes \$44,000**
Sustaining contribution in support of administration
- Voyageurs Area Boy Scouts \$20,000**
Sustaining contribution for the Boy Scouts program in Itasca County
- Youth for Christ. \$50,000**
Sustaining contribution for the Campus Life program in Itasca County
- Childcare Resources and Referral \$50,000**
Support to help southeast Minnesota day care providers resume operation after flood damage
- JOBS NOW Coalition \$195,000**
Support to increase economic literacy and labor market outcomes for greater Minnesota residents
- Lakewood Health System. \$26,000**
Implementation of the Lightspeed high-speed Internet program
- Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota . . . \$5,000**
Planning funds for ending child, youth and family homelessness in Minnesota

Local Grants Awarded 2007 Total: \$13,216,560



- Economic initiatives**
\$5,367,500
- Educational attainment**
\$5,553,540
- Fairness and opportunity**
\$2,115,960
- Intercultural competency**
\$57,410
- Rural voice**
\$122,150

Grants Awarded 2003-2007



- Grand Rapids/Itasca Area**
\$42,874,340 (71%)
 - Rural Minnesota**
\$17,674,045 (29%)
- Note: Does not include a \$20 million grant for the Grand Itasca hospital.
- Note: Full financial statements always can be found at the Blandin Foundation web site or by contacting the Foundation.

- MN Ass'n. for Volunteer Administration . . . \$10,000**
Support the Volunteer Resources Leadership Initiative across rural Minnesota
- MN Council on Foundations \$8,320**
Support to provide MCF's Minnesota Grantmakers On-Line service for 40 Blandin Foundation grantees
- Women's Foundation of Minnesota . . . \$100,000**
To identify and create a statewide policy agenda for women and girls throughout rural Minnesota

Intercultural Competency
A new grant area, established in 2007, that supports projects to help communities work effectively across differences. Through these efforts, communities identify their varied cultural voices, foster intercultural dialog and understanding, and bring to the table different life experiences (whether from gender, age, physical ability, race or cultural background) that enhance a community's collective problem-solving resources.

- Independent School District 32 \$45,000**
Project support for a Hispanic literacy program and cultural competency training
- Itasca Community College \$2,410**
Support of a series of events in Itasca County to increase awareness of Native American culture
- Itasca County Historical Society \$10,000**
Support for a project research director to organize a Native American exhibit at the Itasca County Historical Society
- Advocates for Human Rights \$150,000**
Support for the human rights One Voice Minnesota project throughout rural Minnesota
- Bemidji State University \$9,000**
Support for a series of lectures on Native American education and to develop a revolving loan account for post-secondary education expenses
- Boys & Girls Clubs of White Earth Reservation \$5,000**
Feasibility study of opening clubs in Waubun, Callaway, Rice Lake, Elbow Lake and White Earth
- Coalition of African Community Services . . \$45,000**
Support to foster economic development among a diverse population in the southwest region of Minnesota
- Headwaters Regional Dev't. Commission . . \$25,000**
To implement a race relations initiative in Bemidji the area

Rural Voice
These grants support new and existing avenues for rural residents to express rural perspectives in local and statewide policy debates, so they have an effective voice on issues and opportunities.

- Itasca Community Television \$6,000**
Technical assistance to plan for future technology needs
- Northern Community Radio. \$25,000**
Planning support to encourage interactive media
- United Way of 1000 Lakes. \$1,150**
Support for a forum to end poverty in Grand Rapids
- Northern Community Radio. \$90,000**
Sustaining contribution for news programming throughout Itasca County
- Duluth-Superior Educational TV Corp. . . \$50,000**
Sustaining contribution for the production of "Venture North" and "Native Report" television programs
- Northern Minnesota Public Television . . . \$50,000**
Sustaining contribution for programming and services in northern Minnesota
- Northern Minnesota Public Television . . . \$5,000**
Supplemental sustaining support
- Citizens League \$50,000**
Support for MAP 150 throughout rural Minnesota
- Minneapolis Foundation \$5,000**
Sponsorship for the Minnesota Meeting series
- Minnesota E-Democracy \$49,000**
Support to expand online citizen engagement and citizen media
- Minnesota Public Radio. \$650,000**
Continued support for delivering news programming to rural Minnesota communities
- Minnesota Rural Partners, Inc. \$20,000**
Project support for the MN Rural Summit
- MN Chapter American Planning Ass'n. . . \$5,000**
Support for training sessions on results from a citizen planner survey and local interest needs to three rural Minnesota sites
- MN Council of Nonprofits, Inc. \$150,000**
Support for nonprofit capacity building initiatives throughout rural Minnesota
- MN Council on Foundations \$7,500**
Partial support of the 2007 annual conference
- Northern Great Plains, Inc. \$44,000**
Support to convene 20 dialogues on economic, social and environmental issues
- Southern Minnesota Quality Broadcasting . . \$50,000**
Support for "Cities on the Move" project
- Univ. of MN Foundation \$75,000**
Support for "Minnesota Minute" public service announcements and online video blog for Minnesota's Sesquicentennial

Develop Diverse Leaders
In addition to ongoing investments in community leadership training programs, the Foundation funds a small number of grants that develop leaders in specialized sectors critical to the health of rural communities.

- Grand Rapids Area Community Foundation . \$20,000**
Support to initiate a Rural Leadership Access Fund for individuals wishing to participate in Blandin Community Leadership Program throughout rural Minnesota
- MN Newspaper Foundation \$225,000**
Operating support for the Editors and Publishers Leadership Program
- White Earth Band of Ojibwe \$10,000**
Develop leadership skills among youth on the White Earth Reservation
- Women's Leadership Fund \$120,000**
Support for the Vote, Run, Lead project to promote women's political leadership throughout rural Minnesota



Dear Neighbors,

From the windows of the Foundation building, we are fortunate to have a great view of the Mississippi River.

Most years, it's a lovely and meandering thing. But this spring, the river seems to be fuller than in a long time. And more powerful. And maybe even a metaphor for our region's economy today.

We know from the Foundation's Rural Pulse™ survey of rural Minnesotans in 2007 that the hard issues our community leaders have faced over several years—health care, funding quality education, generating and preserving household-supporting jobs—remain hard. There have been no “silver bullets.”

Alongside challenges, however, is a new sense of opportunity rising and weaving throughout the region. Like our rivers. We're already hearing about thousands of jobs coming to the “169 corridor” between Itasca and St. Louis Counties. We'll hear a lot more about the challenges of housing, workforce development, education and infrastructure. And certainly we will read of local innovations in the news, see new faces at the grocery store, and hear new languages spoken in our workplaces.

Sometimes when I look out at the steady push of the Mississippi, I wonder—are we ready for opportunity, for change? Could we stop it even if we wanted to? What if the river looks different when it reaches its peak? Will benefits and burdens be widely shared?

Of course the answers all point to: it's up to us. And I mean ALL of us.

Today Mr. Blandin's endowment, the funding base for the Foundation, stands at a value of just about one-half billion dollars. Even if we could pile all that money up on Main Street or out on Wall Street, it would accomplish absolutely nothing on its own. When the Foundation's resources get married with community members' passion, persistence and leadership we find the real opportunities for positive change, the real power of Mr. Blandin's gift to our communities.

This community report profiles the stories of some of our many valued partners, with whom we were grateful to stand beside in their challenges and successes in 2007. We value the opportunity to be a partner, especially in our home communities, in shared hopes and challenges—especially with a rising river.

With thanks,

Jim Hoolihan, President and CEO



Trustees

Front row, from left: Mike Johnson, Brian Nicklason, Ken Lundgren (since retired), Bruce Stender

Middle row, from left: Martin Jennings, Yvonne Cheek, Karen Diver, George Thompson (chair)

Top row, from left: Marian Barcus, Joe Maber, Gene Radecki, Kris Ferraro, Jim Bensen, Tim Bonner, M.D.

Not pictured: Bonnie Besse Rietz



Foundation staff

Front row, from left: Sandra Wicklund, Paula Trombly, Tim Schultz, John Weyer, Becky Adams, Diana Daigle, Linda Gibeau, Mary Magnuson

Middle row, from left: Jackson Huntley, Jerry Randall, John Jokela, Michele Smith, Jennifer Bevis, Missy Ross, Shari Undeland, Matt Rezac, Alana Hughes, Mary Kosak

Back row, from left: Angela Jenkins, Terri Dufner, Traci Gangl, Gary Rosato, Malissa Bahr, Jean Lane, Janet Borth, Valerie Shangreaux, Wade Fauth, Jim Hoolihan, Bernadine Joselyn, Becky LaPlant, Allison Abcan



Don't stop thinking about tomorrow

Itasca County Area Forest Legacy Fund helps residents conserve private working forests for future generations

With 1,000 lakes and 1.3 million acres of forestland, Itasca County is the place thousands of families call home, and even more call their second home. For generations, forests have been a shared heritage here, building the character of the residents and the core of the economy.

Forest conservation might seem a big and idealistic effort best left to environmentalists and owners of large tracts, since the county's forests have always been here and they'll be here in the future, too. But local, individual landowners now have an important tool to help them preserve forestlands and leave a legacy of healthy, intact forests.

"When it comes to Itasca County's forests and waters, we know now that the past is not the template for the future," said Bernadine Joselyn, director of Public Policy and Engagement at the Blandin Foundation. "Unlike any other time in history, private forestlands are quickly being split up and changed forever."

Over the past seven years, there have been approximately 400 forestland parcel splits in Itasca County. On average, roughly 0.4 percent of the county's private forests are parcelized each year; most parcelization occurs near water, public forests and near larger communities in the county. While these splits increase the landowner base, they also increase the risk to overall forest health.

"When forestland is broken into smaller and smaller pieces, new property deeds and potential development is only part of the story," said Art Norton, Itasca field representative for The Nature Conservancy. "Researchers have discovered that changed boundaries can actually disrupt a forest's life-sustaining ecological processes. Animal habitats are displaced. Water quality is affected. Invasive species can penetrate."

As a key member of the Minnesota Forest Legacy Partnership, Blandin Foundation has been instrumental in helping to secure conservation easements for nearly 53,000 acres of working forests owned by industries. So successful were these conservation easements in balancing the forestlands' economic and environmental sustainability, Joselyn was delighted when the board members of the Grand Rapids Area Community Foundation (GRACF) began talking in fall 2007 about developing a similar fund targeted to private landowners.

Success breeds success

Given the Minnesota Forest Legacy Partnership's success in preserving large tracts of land through

conservation easements, GRACF asked itself why private landowners with smaller acreages — about 40 percent of total forestlands in the county — shouldn't be able to use the same tools to protect their lands from subdivision or development.

"Many families that own forestland want to protect their properties so that they can't be developed even if those properties leave their hands," said Joseph Stauffer, a lawyer and GRACF 2008-2009 board chair. "But there's a new twist to the traditional concept of conservation. These families want to conserve 'working' forests, meaning that they want to reserve rights to harvest timber and other wood products."

The fund was publicly introduced at a community forum on January 17, 2008. More than 150 interested landowners and area leaders heard an overview of conservation easements. They also learned how, when fully funded, the Itasca County Area Forest Legacy Fund will help:

- Promote the concept of sustainable forests throughout the Itasca County region.
- Assist private landowners with tracts of forested land, 20 acres or more, to pursue conservation easements.
- Provide local donors with the opportunity to become stewards of local forestlands.
- Leverage financial support from other funders for this initiative.

"This is an innovative concept that exactly fits with the mission of our five-year-old Vital Forests/Vital Communities Initiative," said Joselyn of the Blandin Foundation. It's an opportunity for all of us to promote the ecological health of our forests while also understanding that we depend upon our forests for our economic health."

The Blandin Foundation, as part of its commitment to strengthened economic opportunity in rural communities, provided a \$10,000 matching challenge grant to the GRACF to help seed the new fund. The Foundation also has worked with local partners including the Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce and Minnesota Deer Hunters Association — as well as landowners Rajala Companies and Forest Capital Partners — to conserve 53,000 acres of working forest lands in Itasca and Koochiching Counties.



Aaron and Carol Wenger, Grand Rapids, frequently ride the trail that winds through their land along the Mississippi River. The Wengers completed a conservation easement in 1999.

The river runs by it

When he's the "staff physicist" on KAXE radio, his listeners enjoy a slightly "mad scientist" persona that makes science fun and complex concepts easier to understand.

But Aaron Wenger and his wife, Carol, were perfectly sane when their neighbors told them about conservation easements 10 years ago.

"We never thought of our land as an investment," said Wenger today about the 200 acres along the Mississippi River he and Carol own. "We bought it so that we could enjoy living and working on it. Our land is our lifestyle."

Working with the Minnesota Land Trust in 1999, the Wengers created a conservation easement, which protects 50 of their acres from development.

"For our purposes, the conservation easement was the right decision," he said. "We had no intention of dividing or selling off pieces of our land. We expect to keep it in the family and work it: gardening, keeping bees, raising horses, collecting syrup, managing the woods, fishing and hunting."

Aaron and Carol both were surprised how much the Minnesota Land Trust was able to customize the conservation easement to their own wishes. In spite of the fact that they have willingly signed away future development rights, they are able to use the land for hunting and for collecting maple syrup — just as they had done before they signed the agreement.

Although the Wengers might be considered one of the pioneering families for adopting a conservation easement to manage the future of their land, Aaron believes future interest about this conservation tool is increasing.

"I'll be shocked if more people don't start using it," he said. "A lot of people, like us, own their land because they love it. Not because they want to make money from it. They want to take care of it and have it around for their grandkids."

The new Itasca County Forest Legacy Fund of the Grand Rapids Area Community Foundation now provides support and tools for other families interested in developing their own forestland legacies.

What is a conservation easement?

A conservation easement is a legal tool that assists people in keeping their property from being split up for development. A private land-owning family works with a nonprofit organization, such as the Minnesota Land Trust (www.mnland.org), to craft the conservation easement that reflects family members' values and

expectations. When it is signed, the family will maintain ownership of the property but surrender development rights. The family will gain the comfort of knowing that the land will be protected in perpetuity from unwanted development. Some may realize tax advantages.

Funds raised for conservation easements help cover costs of legal fees and monitoring and evaluation supervision for perpetuity.

For more information, visit the Grand Rapids Area Community Foundation (GRACF) website www.gracf.org.