Good morning and thank you so much for inviting me here to receive this recognition today. I never knew Mr. Bollman, but I understand that many of you have powerful memories of a man who is described as “a beacon of hope.” It is truly an honor and a privilege for me to travel from Boston to receive an award that carries the name and spirit of a leader like Nicholas Bollman.

I am a long time resident of Hyde Square, a neighborhood in Boston that many low-income immigrants, Latinos, and African Americans call their home. At Hyde Square Task Force we don’t often use words like “smart growth” and “livable community” to describe our work… but it is a perfect description of the end result we are hoping for; a community that has built an environment that meets many of the working and living needs of our residents, a community that has local resources to enhance health and safety, a strong sense of connection to one another, and that celebrates life and hope through civic engagement, arts, and culture.

But why is this little neighborhood in Boston so well-known?

I believe it is because our teenagers have been and are at the center of demanding and creating changes to improve their community, health centers, housing, train and bus stations, parks, and schools. And these teens don’t just complain and demand from others to do it. They lead by example, working every day to improve the centers of civil society in our neighborhood and our city. This is where and how they learn to think critically about the inequities and discrimination they face every day.

For example, they tutor younger kids and teach peers in our schools and health centers. And this is how they learned what really goes on in these institutions. They work there, and as Manuel (Dr. Pastor) was suggesting yesterday, they sometimes even work alongside “the enemy” in putting together the jigsaw puzzle. But sometimes they also play a little chess when they have to and they sure
know how to punch back if necessary. They don’t just get together with people that think like them and cry oppression expecting power to give a damn about it. They do the hard personal work and the hard community work that it takes to bring liberation. And during this journey of thinking and sweating, they organically become leaders in their community.

Over the past decade the list of their community organizing accomplishments is truly impressive. Youth, supported by adults, have had major success in reclaiming a once drug- and violence-infested neighborhood (called by the DEA the cocaine capital of New England), in bringing comprehensive sexual education and civics education to the public schools, in pushing the government to renovate our parks and improve basic city services, increasing teen jobs, voter registration, and celebrating Afro Latin culture.

Most of our teens’ parents are immigrants, many undocumented, and English is their second language. Most of the youth are underperforming students and uninvolved in creative and fun activities. In many ways they are invisible in their schools and invisible to many Boston and Massachusetts residents as well; many of them are not heading toward college but they are not in a gang either, as many would like us to believe. We see their potential and invite them in. In spite of their challenges they use their energy and capacity to create a healthy, vibrant, safe, and joyful community.

For many of these teens living in Hyde Square, especially those for whom English is a second language, these experiences become the first time anyone has listened to them or taken them seriously. We don’t want them to be silent anymore. We work with them to find their voices and use them for good. Once they start working and speaking out they begin to understand their power and the complication of using power for the benefit of others. But that’s when they become engaged and bring that engagement back into their schools, improving their grades, graduating from high school, and doing post-secondary work as well as attending and completing college.

Boston is a majority-minority city searching, in theory, for a next generation of leaders that includes people of color from disadvantaged communities historically excluded from civil society. Through their work in their neighborhood and schools, our Latino and African American teens and young adults are being trained to take on those leadership positions ensuring that everyone will be represented in the halls of power and all communities will have equitable access to resources and opportunities.

But as you know, some of you better than others, this journey to become visible is still too hard to travel, with little incentives, for most of these teens and for most adults in our communities, including many of us here today.

Indigenous leadership - people that live and work in distressed communities to bring positive change and are reflective of the demographics of those communities - is not yet a very popular concept even amongst the most “revolutionary” circles.
If we are going to achieve the dreams Manuel (Dr. Pastor), Denis (Hayes, Bullitt Foundation) and “Funk Master Fong” (aka Richard Woo, The Russell Family Foundation) described in their great presentations yesterday, we are going to need to figure out how to better support these types of long term community governed efforts. This—development of indigenous leadership—is what creates and strengthens civil society and the fabric of all our communities, the relationships that sustain people in need for the long term. Not the new program of the month from the next venture philanthropist of the week.

I spent the first ten days of this year in Haiti, a country with the second highest nonprofits per capita ratio in the world and very little to show for it. Very few of these nonprofits are governed, managed, or staffed by Haitians. Somehow we think we can do it for them without them. And Boston and the NGOs and their funders, as well as the government and the private sectors, the unions, and many so-called social justice organizations, unfortunately, are not that different from the NGOs in Haiti when it comes to promoting or excluding intelligent and outspoken indigenous leaders at the higher levels of their organizations.

It has become clear to me that unless we equip, support, and walk with the people we want “to help,” our efforts will never yield the results we are looking for. It is not enough we build green affordable housing if people in the community are not part of this process, in an honest way, at the higher levels of decisionmaking, not just during the charrette process.

How come we at so many foundations give millions of dollars to “high impact,” business-oriented nonprofits, Ivy League-managed, evidence-based measurement tools… bla bla bla… please spare me the business talk until your board, staff, list of contractors, services providers, and investment management companies include women and people of color as well indigenous leaders. “High impact leaders and boards” that parachute into our neighborhood but will never raise their kids here are an empty promise.

How come we so seldom invest equally in locally governed organizations, run by local leaders, with real dollars, long term? Apparently they are not good enough…but somehow we expect these organizations, people, and communities to thrive and progress? Let’s walk with them and let’s not confuse pity for empathy.

Boston, I’m sad to report, is not that different from Port-au-Prince when it comes to this issue of exclusion of indigenous leaders.

And when I say “we” I include myself in the family of foundations, nonprofits, and government bodies. As a board member of the Boston Foundation, the Nellie Mae Foundation, and as a fellow and advisor to the Barr Foundation, I know firsthand how we help, and how we don’t help, to promote and increase “indigenous leadership” and participation in our city. As a high school drop-out, ironically today, I’m a Boston School Committee member. I am the only immigrant and the only Latino member of an appointed School Committee—somebody said token—that oversees a system that has more than 60 percent of Latino and
immigrant students combined, if not more (and tragically still less than 10 percent of Latino and immigrant teachers).

As for education, Manuel (Dr. Pastor) mentioned Germany yesterday. In my opinion the reason Germany is doing so well is they have embraced rigorous technical and vocational education. We need educational systems that lead to employment in the jobs of the future. The U.S. has a troubled racial history with regards to vocational education and must fix it ASAP. I welcome all of you to check the Nellie Mae Foundation proposals for changing our educational systems.

As a father of a recent college graduate from one of the most expensive universities in the U.S., I wish my son knew how to fix an electrical fuse (or at least know what an electrical fuse is) instead of calling me every time an electrical appliance stops working. Too much education—too little knowledge.

The lack of people living in distressed communities at the higher levels of decisionmaking in Boston’s government, nonprofit, civil society, and private sectors only leads to more civic disengagement in our communities and no outside “high impact organization or initiative” is going to change that.

As it was suggested yesterday, we need to indentify and invest in leaders and networks of unlikely partners: grassroots organizers, nonprofit, business, and government leaders to strengthen our civil society through investing in the development of indigenous leaders and organizations that give the tools and opportunities to our most vulnerable youth and families in our neighborhoods… so they can control their destinies and put together the pieces that create a vibrant, safe, and joyful urban community.

Will Boston and the U.S. create the systems, networks, pathways, and opportunities for our hard-working youth to be invited and welcomed to solve the jigsaw puzzle that will insure our survival on earth? I sure hope so… Or would these youth find it too difficult a journey not worth the sacrifice, and exit like so many of our youth and our friends in the past?

I’m here today because of the hard work of thousands of young people in my neighborhood who still so patiently believe it is possible to lead a meaningful and dignified life in the U.S.A. So on behalf of them and hundreds of youth activists and organizers in Boston and beyond, I accept the 2012 Nicholas Bollman Award.

Thank you so much to all you members of Funders’ Network and for this honor and for your support!