I was so happy and humbled when Ben notified me earlier this winter that I had been selected to receive the Nick Bollman award for 2014. Stunned is probably the more appropriate word. But oh so grateful! During the past 18 months, I have taken over management of the grantmaking program at New York Community Trust, and had far less time to spend on our environment program, and smart growth issues. So it is especially meaningful to me at this time of transition to be recognized, and especially with an award named for Nick Bollman.

Back in the late 1980s, when I was relatively new to grantmaking, I worked closely with Nick (he on the West coast, me in NYC) as co-chairs of the Neighborhood Funders Group, before it had staff. George H.W. Bush was president, and Jack Kemp was HUD secretary, and Nick and I organized community development funders across the country to get involved in national housing policy. It was fun and rewarding, and my first taste of philanthropy partnering with government. (Note – in those days, bipartisanship was still possible in Washington.)

Fast forward more than a decade, to the early years of the 21st century when I joined the board of Funders’ Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities, which had recently become an independent nonprofit. I had recently taken over our national environment grants program. Joining the TFN board at that time profoundly influenced my and the Trust’s environmental grantmaking. As a planner by training, I understood the power of the smart growth framework, which to me is grounded in sustainable land use, to achieve our grant objectives in climate change, habitat protection, and environmental health. And as a longtime staff member of a community foundation, I believed that smart growth made so much sense for translating the cosmic concerns of a changing climate to local neighborhoods and regions.

But I certainly don’t need to explain that connection to this audience – you already get it. In preparing these remarks, I reviewed Luther Propst’s speech while accepting this award last year. It turns out that both Luther and I are proud alums of the planning department at UNC-Chapel Hill. We learned our land use from the masters! Luther prepared such a wonderful top-ten list of smart growth philanthropy, based on his experiences founding and running the Sonoran Institute, an organization which we supported for its work with county commissioners in the northern Rockies, home of critical wildlife migration corridors, and rapidly developing but precious habitat.
My career has been decidedly less focused. As a grantmaker, I have covered a wide swath of community development and environmental issues. So the rest of my remarks will include my takeaways about a career as a grantmaker.

Let me say first that this perch as a funder is a privileged position. All of us in the room who are funders understand this. All kinds of information, smart people, and interesting issues cross our desk and offices daily. And it is our privilege to get to know the people and the issues. But with that privilege comes a responsibility to be as thoughtful and strategic as possible with the resources entrusted to us. In many ways, we are the bankers. We are called on to analyze funding opportunities, understand the risks and rewards of an investment, and make smart choices. In contrast to bankers in the business sector, however, our investments are in complex arenas, covering issues of poverty, equity, the environment, education – the commons if you will, where a win is not a profit, but a social advancement for a group, a city, a state, a nation, the globe.

Ok. But really, grantmaking is about deadlines, writing case statements, convincing a board, cajoling our fellow funders to join us, more deadlines, and more writing and editing. The nitty gritty is not all that glamorous. So how do we keep our energy up, our excitement, our sense of purpose? In my experience, there are at least four ways to retain an edge in this world of grantmaking.

#1. Keep learning.

One benefit, and indeed, one mandate of being an engaged grantmaker is the ongoing opportunity to learn something new. When I first came into the business, my boss at the time told me that reading the newspaper was a daily requirement. In our city, it was the New York Times, although since then, the Times has become more of a national paper with fewer resources devoted to New York City. Of course, now the internet and the array of devices we all have to stay connected to the internet means that we can stay updated minute to minute. Getting on webinars, attending meetings, reading blogs—there is not enough time in the day to do it all, but we are in an information business, and staying informed is a part of our job.

#2. Collaborate and form partnerships.

My only experience in philanthropy has been in a community foundation. They are by definition built on groups of funds, a community of trusts if you will. As public charities, they are ideal for housing collaborative funds, and serving as neutral tables for learning and doing together with other funders. I have found the experience of creating networks, ad hoc groups, formal collaborations, very helpful, and fun. They don’t always take off, but when they do, they are immensely valuable.

Partnerships with the public sector are particularly rewarding. Much of our grantmaking is meant to influence public policy. Especially working in cities, philanthropic partnerships with local government can move mountains. Since 2001, I have been involved in a collaborative of funders focused on workforce development in New York City. It has not only expanded the pie of philanthropic resources to help job seekers, but it has literally shaped the City’s policies. More germane to the world of smart growth is the Local Sustainability Matching Fund which the Funders’
Network manages, to spark partnerships between local philanthropy and sustainability directors in communities across the country.

And of course, I need to mention our One Region fund, managed by TFN staff, and focused on sustainable transportation and TOD in the New York metro region. Let me also acknowledge my colleagues Laura Rossi from Westchester Community Foundation and Sol Marie Alfonso Jones from Long Island Community Foundation who are at this conference.

#3. Take a walk on the other side

We all know conceptually how difficult it is for a nonprofit to keep the funds rolling in, and how tough the grind of fundraising can be. Many of us came from nonprofits or other situations where we too had to raise money. By joining a board or leading a funder collaborative, we can all stay in touch with fundraising. It helps us to remain humble, and not take our role as the person with the money, therefore the power, as seriously.

#4. Be strategic. Take calculated risks.

In the business of grantmaking, we are paid to make judgment calls. Each foundation has a particular culture and purpose. Some are very local and dedicated to supporting a group of nonprofits over time; others are national or global, and looking for strategic opportunities to test a theory. There is a time for providing support to meet a basic need, and a time for grabbing a window of opportunity, or providing the seed funds as leverage for more significant contributions. But we all know the most fun in these jobs is to make something happen. Sometimes we need to go out on a limb and take a risk. After all, grant dollars should be risk capital some of the time.

Let me end my remarks with some thoughts on smart growth and livable communities. As I noted earlier, smart growth has been a very valuable framework for developing a national environment grants program from a community foundation. While one can bemoan the amorphous nature of the smart growth concept (it's land use at its core but can accommodate so many other features), in the end it is about allocating the use of land, through zoning in cities, through transportation and infrastructure investments regionally, in ways that protect habitat, watersheds, and shorelines, while promoting economic opportunity, and ensuring equity. None of this is easy in a nation that values private property rights, where many are suspicious of government planners, where each town has home rule. But just in the years since Funders’ Network was created, we have already seen the private market pivoting to more sustainable metropolitan growth patterns, with driving time declining.

Climate change is rapidly becoming the central environmental issue of our time. The IPCC (UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) will issue a report this spring that notes we have about 15 more years to make serious efforts at reducing our greenhouse gas emissions, or place the inhabitants of this planet in peril. We are literally running out of time. But the environmental advocates that all of us support have failed to make the case to the American public. Climate change
remains a cosmic issue, and thus out of the realm of daily life and struggle. Jobs and economic opportunity will trump climate on any poll or focus group.

As naïve as this might sound, I believe that we must use our philanthropic resources and muscle to push a community agenda, based on principles of sustainability and resilience, but also fairness and equity. As with any other issue, those with fewer resources are feeling the pain of climate change first and most acutely, whether they are an indigenous community on an island nation in the South Pacific, or an immigrant who lived in a winterized beach bungalow on the shore of Staten Island in October 2012 when Sandy destroyed their neighborhood.

It is about continuing the growth in use of public transit, already well on its way in cities from Denver to Los Angeles to Houston. It’s about fix-it-first, and smart grids and green infrastructure and energy efficiency. While on the global scale, the chances of the world getting this right seem slim, we can all take heart in the successes of our grants in communities and regions.

Today is our daughter’s 26th birthday. She and her older brother both live in cities, New York City (Brooklyn to be more precise), and San Francisco. Both ride their bikes to work on good days. They eat food grown locally. They are part of a cohort of millennials who are revitalizing cities from New Orleans to Detroit, Los Angeles to New York. And yes, they are living in apartments that once housed someone with less education and opportunity.

As funders lucky enough to be working in the smart growth arena, it is up to us to ensure that our grantmaking helps towns, cities, regions, and states to make the investments that will allow this generation to live with fewer cars, consume less space and energy, and stuff, while, and this is the most difficult part, addressing the fundamental inequalities of our society. A tall order indeed.

Thank you again to the Funders’ Network and my colleagues and friends who nominated me for this award. I am truly honored, and reinvigorated for more strategic grantmaking ahead.