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Diane Portnoy

Founder and CEO

Massachusetts Immigrant Entrepreneurs of the Year Announced

Immigrants honored for their economic, social and scientific contributions in Massachusetts

MALDEN, Mass, May 11, 2015 / Nearly 250 business and community leaders joined Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker in honoring the contributions of immigrant entrepreneurs at The Immigrant Learning Center's 2015 Immigrant Entrepreneur of the Year Awards Dinner on Thursday, May 7, 2015, at the Royal Sonesta Hotel in Cambridge, MA. The 33 outstanding nominees for these fourth annual awards came from 25 countries, from Canada to Ghana, and started businesses in 25 cities and towns across Massachusetts that have impacted the lives of people around the world. Collectively, they have generated income and investment totaling more than \$1 billion.

During the reception, Governor Baker commented on the contributions of immigrant entrepreneurs in Massachusetts. "When I'm here and I look around this room and we are surrounded by so many people who decided to give it a shot in a different country, in a different community with all the other issues they were dealing with and they said, 'You know what? I still know how to climb the hill.' It's part of what makes Massachusetts great, it's part of what makes this country great, and it's part of what makes an organization like this that wants to help people climb the hill and find their way to the next one so terrific."

Diane Portnoy, The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc. (ILC) Founder and CEO, welcomed guests to the Awards Dinner and explained that the impetus for recognizing immigrant entrepreneurs was their vital role in the economy. "Whether they are part of the 28 percent of the immigrant-owned main street businesses, 25 percent of the immigrant-owned technology companies or 40 percent of the [first- and second-generation] immigrant-founded Fortune 500 companies, they help keep our economy vibrant and growing."

Later, keynote speaker, Massachusetts Secretary of Housing and Economic Development Jay Ash, told attendees, "As a former city manager of the city with the largest immigrant population in Massachusetts [Chelsea], I know how important immigrants are to a local economy, and I know how important the support for budding immigrant entrepreneurs is." To the nominees he said, "I'm so impressed with the stories I hear of getting to this country and finding a way to make a difference in your own lives, in the lives of your family and then to have even more time to make a difference in the lives of the people in the community. So I want to thank you for making that difference and making that commitment."

Master of Ceremonies, University of Massachusetts Boston Chancellor Dr. J. Keith Motley, helped present awards in four categories: Business Growth, Neighborhood Business, High-Tech Business and Life Science Business.

Immigrant Entrepreneur of the Year, Business Growth: Helene and Thomas Stohr, founders of swissbakers in Allston and Reading, Country of origin: Switzerland

In just nine years, the Stohrs have expanded their business from a home kitchen providing authentic, Swiss baked goods to a train depot outlet in Reading, to a 14,000-square-foot café and commercial bakery in Allston. In the past three years alone, revenue increased by 340 percent. Their business practices

demonstrate a commitment to community service and environmental sustainability, or what they call “grandchild sustainable.”

In accepting the award, the Stohrs thanked their customers whom they call “guests,” their employees whom they call “co-entrepreneurs” and insist are all “food-loving guest-huggers,” their vendors, state and local authorities, partners in community building like Herb Chambers, and the late Boston Mayor Thomas Menino for sharing their vision of creating 100 new jobs, which is now coming true.

Immigrant Entrepreneur of the Year, Neighborhood Business: Damaris Pimentel, founder of Ultra Beauty Salon in Jamaica Plain, Country of origin: Dominican Republic

In the United States, immigrants make up 13 percent of the population and 28 percent of main street business owners. Damaris Pimentel is an outstanding example of these small business owners for her own success and the success of the other entrepreneurs she has mentored. She came to the U.S. from the Dominican Republic with her parents and seven siblings without knowing any English. For the last 33 years, she has made Ultra Beauty Salon an integral part of her neighborhood.

Pimentel described herself as “a Dominican by nationality and probably a Bostonian by heart.” She credited her success to the many mentors she has had who taught her the importance of “looking for each other’s back” and contributing to a neighborhood while admitting, “20 years ago Jamaica Plain wasn’t as desirable as it is today.” Lastly, she said, “that’s why I understand that helping a neighborhood grow together with the needs of all the different little businesses that help the economy and the country is so important.”

Immigrant Entrepreneur of the Year, High-Tech Business: Dries Buytaert, founder of Acquia in Burlington, Country of origin: Belgium

Massachusetts owes much of its reputation as a tech hub to its immigrant entrepreneurs. Dries Buytaert created Drupal, a free, open-source, website-building platform, at age 19 in a dorm room in his native Belgium. In 2007, he relocated to Massachusetts to create a company, Acquia, to help companies, not-for-profit organizations and governments create engaging digital experiences using Drupal. Today, the company serves more than 4,000 customers, and Drupal powers roughly one in 40 websites worldwide.

Beginning in a dorm room, it would seem that Buytaert could have launched Acquia anywhere, but he said of his success, “I couldn’t imagine Acquia taking off the way it did if it wasn’t based here in Boston. There is something about Boston and something about the people here that help make Acquia a success story.”

Buytaert explained part of his motivation for building one of the fastest growing private technology companies in the United States by saying, “The best part of my job is actually this idea that we can do well and do good.... Hundreds of thousands of nonprofits from Greenpeace to Doctors Without Borders to The [Immigrant Learning] Center and many others use Drupal to power their sites.”

Immigrant Entrepreneur of the Year, Life Science Business: Laxman Desai, founder of Toxikon Corporation in Bedford, Country of origin: India

Laxman Desai was born in India, studied in Belgium and came to the United States to pursue cancer research. After the death of his mentor, Dr. Sidney Farber, he launched his own company in 1977, Toxikon

Corporation. Toxikon is a pre-clinical contract research firm that provides testing for the pharmaceutical, biotechnology and medical device industries.

The early years were lean and Desai said, “There were times I thought I was going to sell pencils on the street. There were no opportunities. Nevertheless, Boston or Massachusetts was a great center for opportunities. America as a whole is a great center for anybody who can work hard and who can, through persistence, achieve their dreams.” His persistence paid off. Nearly 40 years later, Toxikon has more than 1,000 active customers worldwide. Over the years, Toxikon has trained more than 15,000 scientists, and in 2009, Desai started an award fund to encourage others to pursue careers in toxicology to continue the advancement of the field.

Information about all the nominees for The ILC Immigrant Entrepreneur of the Year Awards can be found on The ILC’s website at www.ilctr.org.

PHOTO CAPTION: From left Damaris Pimentel (from Dominican Republic), owner, Ultra Beauty Salon, Jamaica Plain (winner, 2015 ILC Immigrant Entrepreneur of the Year, Neighborhood Business); Dries Buytaert (from Belgium), founder, Acquia, Burlington (winner, 2015 ILC Immigrant Entrepreneur of the Year, High-Tech Business); Diane Portnoy, ILC Founder and CEO; Gov. Charlie Baker; Dr. Laxman Desai (from India), founder, Toxikon Corporation, Bedford (winner, 2015 ILC Immigrant Entrepreneur of the Year, Life Science Business); Helene and Thomas Stohr (from Switzerland), founders, swissbakers, Reading and Allston (winner, 2015 ILC Immigrant Entrepreneur of the Year, Business Growth).

About The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc.

The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc. (ILC) of Malden, MA, is a not-for-profit organization that gives immigrants a voice in three ways. The English Language Program provides free, year-round English classes to immigrant and refugee adults in Greater Boston to help them become successful workers, parents and community members. The Public Education Institute informs Americans about the economic and social contributions of immigrants in our society, and the Institute for Immigration Research, a joint venture with George Mason University, conducts research on the economic contributions of immigrants.

For more information, visit the website <http://www.ilctr.org>. The ILC can also be found on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr.

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