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*Diane Portnoy*

*Founder and CEO*

## 2016 Immigrant Entrepreneurs of the Year Announced

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

MALDEN, Mass, May 2, 2016 / Business and community leaders joined Massachusetts Secretary of Housing and Economic Development Jay Ash and U.S. Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker in honoring the contributions of immigrant entrepreneurs at The Immigrant Learning Center's 2016 Immigrant Entrepreneur of the Year Awards Dinner on Thursday, April 28, 2016, at the Royal Sonesta Hotel in Cambridge, Mass. The 42 outstanding nominees for these fifth annual awards came from 26 countries, from Antigua to Zambia, and started businesses in 18 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.

U.S. Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker recorded a message congratulating all the nominees. "The history of the United States has been built on the stories of immigrants who came to this country with little more than a strong work ethic and a desire for a better life....Tonight's honorees continue the great tradition of the immigrants who came before all of us. Our values, our history, our competitiveness and the demands of our economy dictate that we enact comprehensive immigration reform without further delay."

In introducing the awards presented in four categories: Business Growth, Neighborhood Business, High-Tech Business and Life Science Business, Master of Ceremonies, Massachusetts Secretary of Housing and Economic Development Jay Ash discussed how important immigrants have been to Massachusetts in small business formation, supporting local communities, providing jobs and ensuring local access to food and goods.

### **Immigrant Entrepreneur of the Year, Business Growth: Herby Duverné, founder of Taino Consulting Group, LLC in Boston. Country of origin: Haiti**

Before becoming an entrepreneur, Herby Duverné held positions as director of emergency management and deputy director of aviation security at the Massachusetts Port Authority (Massport). His leadership contributed to Logan Airport being named "one of the best, most secure airports in the country" by the Transportation Security Administration.

As the owner of Taino Consulting Group, a cyber and physical security and emergency management service provider, he has overseen explosive growth. Since 2012, he has grown employment from three to 35, and the company increased its workforce seven-fold in 2015 alone.

Duverné devotes many of his personal hours to giving back to his community. He served on Somerville's Anti-Gang Board and its Human Rights Commission. He was appointed by the governor to the Massachusetts Children Trust Board of Directors and is a member of the Boston Foundation's Haiti Fund Advisory Board and the Northeastern Alumni Board.

In his remarks, Duverné described his life as a poor child in Haiti who would often go hungry, his journey as a young man of 20 coming to the United States without knowing any English, working his way through both bachelor's and master's degrees, and becoming a successful business owner. He shared credit for his success with his staff saying, "I learned from day one that being an entrepreneur is a team sport. No matter how creative you are, you can only make it happen with a great team. And I must tell you my success proves to me that I have a wonderful team."

He went on to credit his success more broadly saying, "I might have a lot of confidence, but I am humble enough to know that my story is not unique or special. What is special and unique is the United States of America and its people. This is where a little kid from Haiti with limited means and limited hope can be here tonight honored on this stage with so many accomplished people.

While this country has so much to offer so many of us, it is important to understand that the people who came before me made this possible. I know that I stand on the shoulders of many other immigrants who make this country great every day. I also stand on the shoulders of freedom fighters like Martin Luther King, Jr., Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, Frederick Douglass. Without these people, my dream would not become a reality.

These people did not build a wall to keep others out. They built bridges. They built bridges of freedom so you and I can walk with pride. I accept this award with gratitude and respect for many who fought and sacrificed their lives for me so I can rise."

**Immigrant Entrepreneur of the Year, Neighborhood Business: Gerardo Loza and Hilda Torres, founders of My Little Best Friends Early Learning Center in Malden. Country of origin: Mexico**

Hilda Torres was a beautician in Mexico. After moving to the United States in 1992, she tried to continue her career but was frustrated by the expense and difficulty of finding childcare. To get by, she worked part-time as a beautician and child care worker. Her talent for working with children was undeniable. She was promoted in daycare and gave up her beautician career.

In 2012, Torres and her cousin Gerardo Loza opened My Little Best Friends Early Learning Center with seven students and three teachers. Today, the daycare employs 28 staff members with 114 enrolled students and many more on the waiting list. The children, whose parents come from 29 countries, range from infants to pre-K. They are taught American Sign Language, Spanish and Mandarin in addition to their regular curriculum, which reflects the diversity of the children and the community the daycare serves.

In accepting the award, Torres and Loza thanked their family, their staff, the parents of their students, the City of Malden for "opening their arms to our dream" and The Immigrant Learning Center for "showing that immigrants like us that struggles speaking the language then make a difference in this city and also create jobs for the community."

**Immigrant Entrepreneur of the Year, High-Tech Business: Mihael Mikek, founder of Celtra, Inc. in Boston. Country of origin: Slovenia**

Mihael Mikek is a serial entrepreneur who co-founded and managed several fast-growing businesses in diverse industries with successful exits before launching Celtra, Inc. The company, which was incubated at Babson College's MBA business hatchery in 2006, is the first self-service, rich media advertising platform

for mobile. The company powers \$400 million in media advertising campaigns and counts Fortune 500 companies among its 2,500 brand clients that deliver 50 billion advertisements a year.

Under Mikek's leadership, Celtra has experienced more than 1,000 percent revenue growth over the last four years and won several industry awards. Celtra has more than 140 employees in seven offices around the world; Boston HQ, New York, San Francisco, Chicago, Los Angeles, London and Ljubljana.

Accepting the award on Mikek's behalf was Dekyi Lhaze, VP controller at Celtra, Inc., who said, "It has been such a pleasure to see Mihael grow in his role as a CEO of the company in the past four years. In my eyes he is truly a great, proven leader at this stage.... Celtra in the past four years has grown so much and has hired more than 50 U.S. employees, which is a testament of the success of the immigrant community in this country. So, on behalf of Mihael, I accept this award with a lot of gratitude, and I thank ILC for everything you do."

**Immigrant Entrepreneur of the Year, Life Science Business: Garo H. Armen, founder of Agenus Inc. in Lexington and the Children of Armenia Fund in New York City. Country of origin: Turkey**

Garo H. Armen is the chairman and chief executive officer of Agenus, Inc., an immuno-oncology company he co-founded in 1994 to develop innovative treatments for cancer and other diseases. The company's broad portfolio of checkpoint modulator (CPM) antibodies, vaccines and adjuvants constitutes an immuno-oncology ecosystem, which is unique to Agenus. These have the potential to work in combination to create best-in-class therapeutic regimens and cures for patients suffering from cancer. Dr. Armen was awarded the Humanitarian Award from the Sabin Vaccine Institute, which recognizes extraordinary individuals in the field of biotechnology

Dr. Armen is also the founder and chairman of the Children of Armenia Fund, which implements programs to improve the lives of children in rural villages in Armenia. For his humanitarian efforts in Armenia, he has received the Ellis Island Medal of Honor, the Medal of Honor from the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, and the Gold Medal and an Honorary Citizen of the State bestowal from the governor of Armavir Marz.

In accepting the award, Armen noted that as an Armenian in Turkey he never felt at home while, "America is a remarkable country. I never felt like I did not belong here." He concluded saying, "For the last 23 years, we have been on a mission, on a journey to cure cancer.... And my hope and desire and objective, with my colleagues, is that in the next five to 10 years cancer cures will be commonplace through immunology, which is what my company is dedicated to."

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](http://www.ilctr.org).

PHOTO CAPTION From left:

Diane Portnoy, The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc. Founder and CEO

Mihael Mikek, Celtra, Inc. Founder and CEO and High-Tech Business Winner

Hilda Torres, My Little Best Friends Early Learning Center Co-Founder and Neighborhood Business Winner

Garo H. Armen, Agenus Inc. Chairman & CEO and Life Science Business Winner

Gerardo Loza, My Little Best Friends Early Learning Center Co-Founder and Neighborhood Business Winner

Herby Duverné, Taino Consulting Group, LLC Principal and CEO and Business Growth Winner

Denzil Mohammed, The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc. Public Education Institute Director

Massachusetts Secretary of Housing and Economic Development

Video of Sec. Pritzker's remarks is available on YouTube at: Video: <https://youtu.be/YMVc2kfvd4> and on The ILC Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/ImmigrantLearningCenter/>

### **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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Video: <https://youtu.be/YMVc2kfvd4>