

2023 Immigrant Entrepreneur Award Winners Announced

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

MALDEN, Mass, November 13, 2023 /In recognition of the tremendous contributions of immigrant entrepreneurs to the commonwealth, The Immigrant Learning Center honored four Massachusetts-based immigrant entrepreneurs during the 10th annual Barry M. Portnoy Immigrant Entrepreneur Awards Benefit on November 8, 2023, at the Royal Sonesta Boston.

This awards program is the only one to celebrate immigrant entrepreneurs in New England. It highlights the crucial contributions immigrants from all backgrounds make to society. All proceeds benefit The Immigrant Learning Center.

This year's nominees were 21 entrepreneurs from 15 countries who run businesses in 14 Massachusetts cities and towns from Lawrence to Ludlow to Martha's Vinyard. Collectively they employ more than 1,100 people across the commonwealth.

Winners were selected by a panel of experts in four categories representing sectors where immigrants have an outsized impact. Wendy Estrella, founder of Estrella Law and Estrella Enterprises LLC, from the Dominican Republic, was the winner in Business Growth. The Neighborhood Business winner was Son Vo, founder of Chashu Ramen & Izakaya restaurant, from Vietnam, who also received the key to the city from Eliana Agudelo, chief of staff, office of the mayor, Worcester. Frank van Mierlo, founder of CubicPV, from the Netherlands, was the Technology Business winner, and the Life Science Business winner was Isabelle Aznarez, founder of Stoke Therapeutics, from Uruguay. Although they created four very different businesses in different industries, they all shared a desire to have a positive impact on their community, employees, industry and the country.

Themes for the evening included the value of diversity, the sacrifices immigrants often pay to pursue their dreams and the United States as the perfect place to achieve those dreams. Wendy Estrella accepted the award, "on behalf of all the immigrants, like my mother, who left their children behind with the hope that one day they could be reunited in the United States and pursue their dreams," and said, "Without this country's open arms, my dreams

would never have been able to come true. America is a place where dreams can be transformed into reality through dedication and hard work.” Fran van Mierlo observed that there are a million immigrants coming to this incredibly welcoming country each year and, as a result, “The United States attracts the best and brightest out of the eight billion people that live on the planet, and it’s fantastic to be part of that.’

About The Winners

Wendy Estrella, founder of Estrella Law and Estrella Enterprises LLC in Lawrence.

Country of origin: Dominican Republic

[Wendy Estrella three-minute video profile](#)

Wendy Estrella, the youngest of nine children, was born in a rural town in the Dominican Republic. At age 13, she moved to Lawrence, Mass., a majority Latino city. Estrella earned degrees from Northern Essex Community College and Merrimack College while raising her children and later went on to Massachusetts School of Law. When she opened her practice, Estrella became one of the very few Latina lawyers in Greater Boston. Since then, she has built not just one, but two valuable, vibrant businesses in Lawrence. Estrella Enterprises, a real estate development and property management firm, has a \$30 million real estate portfolio. She has invested heavily in the city of Lawrence with the express aim of rebooting its economic and cultural vitality. Estrella Law has more than tripled its staff since 2019. Estrella is a model leader in her community, serving as chair of the Lawrence Partnership and a board member of North Essex Community College.

Son Vo, founder of Chashu Ramen & Izakaya in Worcester.

Country of origin: Vietnam

[Son Vo three-minute video profile](#)

Son Vo’s mother ran a restaurant in their native Vietnam. After serving in the U.S. Army, he followed in her example and opened his first restaurant, Kaizen Sushi Bar & Grill, in Sturbridge in 2007. His second restaurant, Pho Sure, opened in Shrewsbury in 2014. After a million-dollar restoration, Vo’s third restaurant, Chashu Ramen & Izakaya, opened in downtown Worcester in 2019 and quickly became an anchor business in that neighborhood.

Vo prides himself on being a mentor to his employees, encouraging both their professional and personal growth. He was one of five recipients of the *Worcester Business Journal* 2019 Business Leaders of the Year awards.

Technology Business Winner: Frank van Mierlo, founder of CubicPV, in Bedford.

Country of origin: Netherlands

[Frank van Mierlo three-minute video profile](#)

Frank van Mierlo's first business success, the autonomous underwater vehicle company Bluefin Robotics, positioned him well to do just about anything. He wanted to help transition the energy sector, and CubicPV was his solution. The company owns more than 300 patents, and its technology portfolio promises to underpin the next wave of solar growth, reducing cost while increasing the power output of solar installations.

Not satisfied with one company's success, van Mierlo wants to see the whole industry succeed. To that end, the U.S. Department of Energy recently awarded CubicPV and MIT a multi-million dollar grant to establish the ADDEPT Center at MIT to accelerate the commercialization of tandem solar technology. CubicPV is also focused on building a U.S.-based silicon wafer facility that is expected to be the largest outside of China.

Life Science Business Winner: Isabel Aznarez, founder of Stoke Therapeutics, in Bedford.

Country of origin: Uruguay

[Isabel Aznarez three-minute video profile](#)

Dr. Isabel Aznarez co-discovered Stoke's TANGO technology (Targeted Augmentation of Nuclear Gene Output). Their unique scientific approach aims to address a broad range of severe genetic diseases by increasing, or stoking, protein output from healthy genes to compensate for the non-functioning copy of the gene. Aznarez and her team have identified approximately 6,500 genes that may be amenable to TANGO. She holds 29 patents.

As a woman, a lesbian and a Latina in biotech, she is vocal about topics of diversity and inclusion and has been a mentor to many. Stoke's staff is one-third people of color, and more than half are women. Aznarez credits the company's commitment to diversity and inclusion and key to their success.

Information about all the nominees for The Barry M. Portnoy Immigrant Entrepreneur Awards can be found on The ILC's website at www.ilctr.org.

PHOTO CAPTION from left: Vince Rivers, The Immigrant Learning Center Executive Director, Son Vo, Wendy Estrella, Isabel Aznarez, Frank van Mierlo and Denzil Mohammed, The Immigrant Learning Center Public Education Institute Director

About The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc.

The Immigrant Learning Center, Inc. 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 ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes to help immigrant and refugee adults in Greater Boston become successful workers, parents and community members. The Public Education Institute informs Americans about immigrants and immigration in the United States., and the Institute for Immigration Research, a joint venture with George Mason University, conducts research on the economic contributions of immigrants.

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