

How young people help fight hunger

By KENNETH QUINN

Des Moines businessman John Ruan and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Norman Borlaug started the World Food Prize Youth Institute 10 years ago as a way to reconnect Iowa young people



to issues of food and hunger. That first October only 13 schools were represented at the World Food Prize International Symposium. The Youth Institute has grown remarkably since that time, and will host 200 high school teachers and students this weekend, including a group from Nigeria.

One of the most effective parts of that program is the eight-week, all-expense-paid international internships. Over the past seven years, the World Food Prize has provided the opportunity for more than 60 Iowa high school students to have a potentially life-altering experience abroad each summer as Borlaug-Ruan interns.

Many have worked side by side with leading scientists at some of the foremost agricultural research centers in the world, such as 17-year-old Anne Langguth of Iowa City, who was assigned to the genetic-engineering laboratory at Peking University. Others have confronted hunger in the countryside, like 16-year-old Penny Fang of Ames, who, while working at the International Rice Research Institute outside Manila, volunteered to spend her weekends at a Rotary-sponsored village feeding center for malnourished children.

In summer 2003, a total of 13

Borlaug-Ruan interns had similar challenging and inspiring assignments in Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, India, Costa Rica, China, the Philippines, Brazil, Peru and Mexico. The following stories about two interns may indicate just how powerful this experience can be.

This past summer on a university campus in Beijing, the World Food Prize Youth Institute quietly facilitated the continuation of five generations of Chinese-American cooperation and history.

It was there that Borlaug and I visited with Divindy Grant, a 17-year-old junior from Fairfield assigned to the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences (CAAS). To anyone meeting her, she would seem like just another bright, poised young woman who has spent all her life in a small Iowa town. Except for two things: Divindy was born in Beijing, and she is the fifth generation of the Grant family to have a China connection, a story that has astounded every Chinese (and Iowan) who has heard it.

Divindy Grant's great-great-grandfather, Dr. James Grant, was one of the first American medical missionaries who ventured to China toward the end of the 19th century. He and his wife began a long tradition of international commitment and service that was part of the foundation of a strong American connection to China, which lasted until 1949.

Divindy's great-grandfather, Dr. John B. Grant, like her, born in Beijing (in 1890), continued this family legacy. He earned a place in the medical history of China in the 1920s by being one of the founders of the Peking Union Medical Hospital, an

institution still revered by Chinese today for its reputation of excellence.

John Grant's son, James (Divindy's grandfather), was also born in China (in 1922). He went on to have a long and distinguished career as an international civil servant, beginning with service on a United Nations rehabilitation mission in China after World War II. He eventually became known all over the world as head of UNICEF.

James Grant's son (and Divindy's dad), Jamie, returned to China as a Fulbright Scholar in the 1980s, which is how she happened to be born there. Shortly thereafter, the family returned to the United States and moved to Fairfield where Divindy has grown up, excelling in academics and basketball.

And now Divindy was back in Beijing under the auspices of the World Food Prize, interacting with Chinese scientists at the Agricultural Biotechnology Lab at CAAS and, hopefully, being inspired to turn her life in the direction of scientific inquiry and cross-cultural understanding. She has rich potential to extend her family's remarkable legacy by being a bridge of friendship between America and China, just like the previous four generations of Grants.

There was other vivid evidence of the life-changing power of these internships on another occasion during my trip to Beijing. At the conclusion of our symposium dinner, which was also a celebration of Borlaug's 90th birthday, 18-year-old Nathan Hansen of Rushford, Minn., asked to speak privately to us.

Nathan told us that though he was only halfway through his internship at China

World Food Prize

The 2004 International World Food Prize Symposium — "Rice, Biofortification and Enhanced Nutrition" — is being held today and tomorrow in Des Moines. The awards ceremony — honoring



Yuan Longping of China and Monty Jones of Sierra Leone — will be broadcast live by Iowa Public Television at 7 o'clock tonight.

Agricultural University, the experience had already inspired him to change the future direction of his life. Nathan explained that his four weeks in China as a Borlaug-Ruan intern had made him determined to find a way to make a difference to hungry people in the world. And, as a first step in fulfilling that dream, he had just urgently e-mailed home to change his first-year college schedule and major to life sciences.

Nathan told Borlaug, "The interns were told just before we left Iowa that a World Food Prize internship could change our lives. I just didn't expect it to happen so fast."

Clearly moved by Nathan's heartfelt expression, Borlaug congratulated him for his decision and dedication. The 90-year-old Nobel Peace Prize laureate then put his hand on Nathan's shoulder and told him this was the best birthday present he could possibly receive.

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