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The World Comes to Iowa

October 25, 2010, 4:40 pm

By [Marcia Rogers/Community Contributor](#)

I recently had an interesting conversation with Cedar Rapids Mayor Ron Corbett. Should we- the Cedar Rapids we- stay with our traditional base as a leader in food and agriculture or should we move more swiftly to market ourselves as a Region for Innovation? It was a serious question about how to proceed with our newfound regionalism push and how to form our identity, but it wasn't until I attended an event in Des Moines on October 14th that I could give him my answer.

My husband Dan and I attended the World Food Prize Laureate Ceremony in Des Moines and we saw our Capitol totally transformed into a world class gala venue. Dignitaries from around the world were in town with their entourages- prime ministers, agriculture ministers, ambassadors to the U.S. from every point around the globe were in attendance. Here it is almost two weeks later, and I just cannot get this event out of my mind.

I have heard about the World Food Prize for years. The Laureate Ceremony, which follows a week of meaningful symposiums featuring experts and speakers from all around the world- Kofi Anan, David Beckmann, Jo Luck and others- includes many who are working on the issues of feeding humanity. This ceremony is the Oscars of our state; the honor most appropriately known as our Nobel Prize for food- a celebration of government, and non-government people who have changed the world by taking on its challenges to feed people. A gala event in our finest building with all the pomp and circumstance befitting of royalty, with red carpets and trumpets and a two-story designed inflatable globe filling the rotunda- and all done to recognize and honor people who have done meritorious work to help feed starving people.

The World Food Prize started here in Iowa; all because of the inspiration from Dr. Norman Borlaug's fine work, the philanthropy of the generous Ruan family, and the leadership of Ambassador Kenneth Quinn. This report is not designed to serve as a history lesson or as a review of the many worthy laureates who have been honored since 1987. To reference such greatness in people deserves the attention of an entire book detailing their achievements.

Dan and I thought we would be observing this ceremony from the gallery of the House chambers in the Capitol, with dinner following on the several floors and open areas which could accommodate a crowd of 1,500. Instead we found ourselves being seated near the front with an intimate view of the honorees and access to the dignitaries.

Later at dinner we were pleased and surprised to be seated with Iowa's Secretary of Agriculture, Bill Northey, as well as having the chance to talk with Assistant Secretary of State Jose Fernandez and others notable to the cause being represented. We had the opportunity for a long discussion on how Iowa agriculture can feed the world. Ambassador Ken Quinn and his masterful Director of Planning Frank Swoboda knew what they were doing assigning us to this table. They were issuing an unspoken challenge to me; they must have known what kind of impact such inclusion would spark, and for that nudge I am grateful.

What we did before as a community responding to the initial post earthquake crisis in Haiti with our immense and immediate efforts to provide food out of Cedar Rapids was great, but there is more to be done. Our earliest commitments led us to a belief that we could not abandon Haiti after our initial shipment successes. We needed to recognize that as Iowans with all the agricultural resources at our fingertips we have the ability right here in our community to feed an entire country. Why don't we try and teach a country to feed its own people, wouldn't that even be better? We have the opportunity to capitalize on the World Food Prize events and continue with our plan for helping Haitians to help feed themselves, the way Dr. Norman Borlaug would be encouraging us to do. If Dr. Borlaug was alive and giving us advice today, he would tell us to "take it to the farmer".

We are coming up on one year since we all started paying attention to Haiti; this is not the time to let it slip from our minds. As Iowans we have the capacity to help many countries in need and we know there are other countries like Haiti out there. Let's work towards developing a template for agricultural sustainability unparalleled by any other country. Through our Iowan innovation, let's capitalize on our strengths as leaders in Ag, and use that prowess to enable starving people to plot a new course.

Mayor, this is not the time in the world for us to proclaim we are anything else other than leaders in Food Innovation. It will take every ounce of our creativity and ingenuity to pull off these next efforts towards building a sustainable agricultural template for use in struggling countries. From my perch, I remain inspired, committed and in awe with the World Food Prize team and the trail of worthy laureates to thank and try and emulate.

Ambassador Quinn and Frank Swoboda, through the efforts of you both and your amazing World Food Prize team, you have inspired me to work harder on this plan for Haiti. And thank you for including us in a wonderful and unforgettable evening.

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