



Progress Starts When You Build A Road

Stories of bravery were told at recent ceremony honoring Ken Quinn who was presented the Iowa Award, the state's highest citizen honor.

[Rod Swoboda 1](#) | Jun 15, 2014 | Wallaces Farmer

An Iowan who has worked to secure honors for others is now being recognized himself. Ken Quinn, former U.S. ambassador to Cambodia and current president of the World Food Prize Foundation, received the Iowa Award, the state's highest citizen honor, on May 30. Gov. Terry Branstad presented the award in a ceremony at the World Food Prize Hall of Laureates in Des Moines.

Branstad, along with other speakers, heaped praise upon Quinn, who is the 23rd Iowan to win the award. Established in 1948 by the State of Iowa, the award recognizes the outstanding service of Iowans to others. "Ken personifies the characteristics and qualities that Iowans strive to embody: integrity, philanthropy and service," said Branstad. "Ken has consistently put his state and his country above self."

Quinn assumed leadership of the World Food Prize Foundation, based in Des Moines, on Jan. 1, 2000 following his retirement from the U.S. State Department after a 32 year career in the Foreign Service. Inspired by the vision of Dr. Norman Borlaug, founder of the World Food Prize, Quinn has endeavored to build the annual \$250,000 prize into "the Nobel Prize for Food and Agriculture."

Iowa Award recognizes Quinn's many accomplishments

Held each October in Des Moines during the week of World Food Day (October 16), the World Food Prize award ceremony, the "Borlaug Dialogue" international symposium and the Global Youth Institute have grown in size and stature under Quinn's direction. Last October 1,500 people from 65 countries came to Iowa to attend the three-day symposium to listen to speakers and discuss key issues concerning world hunger, food security and agriculture.

Born in New York City and raised in Dubuque, Quinn joined the U.S. State Department after graduating from Loras College in 1960. He served in Vietnam as an adviser for rural development and helped build roads that allowed farmers to get their crops to market. He also met his wife, Le Son Quinn, in Saigon. "I learned a lot about America, Americans and Iowa while serving in Indochina," Quinn said in his speech at the May 30 Iowa Award ceremony.

Lesson: achieving peace through agriculture

Quinn, now 72, was only 26 years old when he worked as a U.S. Foreign Service adviser with a U.S. military team and Vietnamese farmers and other locals building rural roads in the Mekong River Delta. "I learned the incredible power of rural roads and new agricultural technology," he said. "We couldn't get rid of the Viet Cong with bombs and boots on the ground. But when we built new roads and brought new ag technology and equipment, the Viet Cong went away. Somehow that economic transformation undermined them in a way we didn't realize was possible."

A few years ago Quinn met with former U.S. Defense Secretary Bob Gates and mentioned this story to him. Gates said every one of his commanders in the Afghanistan War said the same thing. "Where the road ends, insurgency begins," says Quinn. "It's true, where the road ends is where hunger begins, where terrorism begins. I learned that in Indochina, something I didn't realize while growing up in Iowa and America."

Instrumental in resettling refugees to Iowa

In 1974, Quinn was the first U.S. State Department official to document the terrors of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. He eventually rose in the ranks and became U.S. ambassador to Cambodia. His embassy was bombed while he and his family were inside. But he kept on working in his career with the U.S. State Department and was present in 1998 when the last Khmer Rouge fighter surrendered.

The State Department assigned Quinn to Iowa Gov. Bob Ray's staff in 1977. Quinn helped coordinate Ray's refugee resettlement program, which brought thousands of boat people (Southeast Asian refugees) to

Iowa. Quinn also led Ray's effort to raise money to send doctors, nurses, food and supplies to Cambodia to aid those who fled other regions in the wake of dictator Pol Pot's brutality.

Faced danger a number of times in his career

Quinn helped carry out dangerous missions during his service in Indochina and elsewhere. He remembers the hugs most of all. He remembers the hug of a Vietnamese father whose wounded son was saved when Quinn drove the boy to a hospital through hostile territory during the Vietnam War. And the hug from a U.S. serviceman he rescued from drowning in Vietnam.

Quinn especially remembers the hug he gave his wife, Le Son, and their three children when the rocket attack struck the U.S. Embassy in Cambodia and bullets came through the windows. Ken and Le Son put their children on the floor and lay on top of them. "I prayed as hard as it is possible for a person to pray that the bullets would kill us and not our children. That is when I learned how much I loved my children."

Quinn is the only civilian to ever receive the U.S. Army Air Medal for his participation in helicopter combat operations in Vietnam. He served six years in Vietnam during the Vietnam War.

Stories of bravery told at Iowa Award ceremony

Friends and dignitaries at the Iowa Award ceremony told stories of Quinn's bravery in his posts throughout his 32 years in the U.S. Foreign Service. For example, while working in Lebanon, Quinn visited the compound of Yasser Arafat, leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organization. While there, Quinn spotted soldiers using a tunnel that

went under a school to move between points; a violation of the United Nation's rules of war.

Quinn gathered his team and said it was time to go. A PLO official escorted them to the border. Their interpreter made a joke that Quinn was from America. The PLO officer realized he had taken an American spy into Yasser Arafat's headquarters. The PLO official had to decide whether to turn Quinn in, in which case both men would likely be killed, or remain silent and perhaps both would live. The PLO officer chose to remain silent.

Later on in his U.S. State Department career, Quinn served on the National Security Council staff at the White House; as a Narcotics Adviser at the U.S. mission to the United Nations; and as Chairman of the U.S. Inter-Agency Task Force on POW/MIA's. In addition to being known as Ambassador Quinn, he is also Dr. Quinn, having earned a PhD in International Relations from the University of Maryland.

Quinn honors his friend, former Gov. Robert Ray

Former Iowa Gov. Bob Ray, now 85 years old, nominated Quinn for the Iowa Award in 2014. Ray served as governor from 1969 to 1983 and earned a reputation as a global humanitarian for opening Iowa's borders to Southeast Asians displaced by the Vietnam War and the genocide atrocities of Cambodian dictator Pol Pot.

In 2013 Quinn named the SHARES Award after Ray. The SHARES Award is new, part of the World Food Prize honors and is given each year to an Iowan who contributes to the fight against world hunger. Quinn announced the honor on Ray's 85th birthday.

When Quinn retired after his 32 year career in the Foreign Service to become president of the World Food Prize, he had one employee. Under

Quinn's leadership, the World Food Prize has grown from about 200 attendees at the annual symposium to more than 1,500 from around the globe. The event attracts business leaders, academics, government officials, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and even sitting heads of state interested in food and agriculture issues.

In recent years Quinn led the raising of \$28 million to renovate the former Des Moines Central Public Library, converting the historic building into the World Food Prize Hall of Laureates. In addition to housing the World Food Prize Foundation offices, it offers educational exhibits for people of all ages to visit and learn about global hunger, world food security and farming.

World Food Prize: If you build it, they will come

In March 2014, Quinn completed a four-year quest to have a statue of Borlaug enshrined at Statuary Hall in the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. Borlaug, who grew up on a family farm near Cresco and who died in 2009, is known as the Father of the Green Revolution. A plant breeder, he developed a disease-resistant strain of wheat and is credited with saving 1 billion people from starvation.

Borlaug won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970 for his hunger-fighting efforts in the less developed areas of the world. He wanted the Nobel committee to create a prize to recognize and encourage outstanding achievements in food and agriculture. The Nobel organization wouldn't do it, so Borlaug came back to Des Moines and founded the World Food Prize in 1986 with the help and financial assistance of John Ruan, a prominent Iowa businessman and philanthropist. Ruan and Borlaug in 2000 offered the position of World Food Prize president to Quinn, who accepted and moved his family back to Iowa from Washington, D.C.

Remember, "Progress starts when you build a road"

At age 72, Quinn remains focused on continuing Borlaug's legacy. He works every day to tell Borlaug's story, to remind people about one of the world's great citizens. In a way, he and Borlaug still work together in a new quest. There will be 9 billion people on this planet by the year 2050 and the question is: How are we going to feed them? Quinn calls it "the biggest challenge in human history." That's another road destined to be built. And thanks to Quinn's efforts and Borlaug's legacy, it can be.

Now, the Iowa Award forces Quinn to consider his own legacy. "I am humbled beyond words," he said after receiving the award at the Hall of Laureates on May 30. "I am just so proud to be an American and so proud to be an Iowan."

The Iowa Award ceremony for Quinn included even more stories of bravery and other interesting anecdotes, some of which remind us that this world is indeed a small world, in many ways. For example, as a kid Quinn lived down the street from a boy named Tom Miller, now Iowa's Attorney General. Miller has held that elected office for a number of years and has worked with Quinn on various projects. They played basketball in the driveway growing up and attended Wahlert High School and Loras College together in Dubuque. Several other people also spoke at the Iowa Award ceremony who know Quinn well and have worked with him over the years.

To read the transcript of Quinn's speech and Gov. Branstad's remarks at the Iowa Award Medal celebration, go to the following sites. You can also view a video at the [Governor's website](#), the [World Food Prize website](#), and on [YouTube](#).

