

Spirit of adventure brought life of service

Wahlert and Loras graduate Ambassador Kenneth Quinn answered the call to serve

By Sue Stanton
Ames Correspondent

DES MOINES — Teachers and farmers have a lot in common. Whether planting the seeds of knowledge into students' minds or tapping down the soil over the infant seeds of an apple orchard, they place their faith into those seeds. Farmers and teachers understand the slow process of growth. They accept the risks; knowing all too well that other forces are at work to injure the seeds they plant.

They accept the knowledge that it may just take a lifetime before the fruit reaches fullest potential and maturity.

So it is with Ambassador Kenneth Quinn, 71, as he speaks about the early influences of his Catholic education; a planting of the seeds by teachers of Catholic morality and social teaching begun in the parochial school system of Dubuque.

"I went to Loras Academy for three years of high school," he says. "We were 750 boys and the school served all of the Dubuque area at that time."

After Loras Academy closed in 1959, Ambassador Quinn transferred to the newly opened Wahlert High School, graduating with its first class in 1960. He then worked his way through his studies at Loras College, doing a number of odd jobs from driving a truck to being an umpire at intramural baseball games. Graduating in 1964, he began to think of whether he would become a "Perry Mason" or go into public service. "At that time, John Kennedy was calling us to a grand adventure involving America in a grand mission for good, but my first job after graduating from Loras was to work in the hide house at Dubuque Pack."

Moving on to Milwaukee, he studied for a master's degree in political science at Marquette University, graduating in one year. Following this venture, he gave up the idea of a degree in law and instead applied and tested alongside 15,000 other Americans for a spot in the U.S. Government's Foreign Service. Taking only one for every 15 who applied, Quinn made the first cut. From then on, it was full steam straight ahead to a place where most young, single American men were heading — Viet Nam.

"I knew nothing about what diplomats did," he smiles. "I thought they were in London, Vienna, Paris, but then



Ambassador Kenneth Quinn stands next to a portrait of a hero — John Paul II during his visit to Iowa. (Photo by Sue Stanton)

some of the people I had studied with, the diplomats, were going over and getting killed. I asked myself, 'What have I gotten into?'"

Assigned to a remote village far from Saigon and its protection, Quinn found his Catholic educational formation impacting him one evening when a Viet Cong soldier quietly slipped into the village to pay his mother a visit. Shot as he did so, his mother dragged her dying son to the village center, crying, calling, begging for anyone to help him as she cradled him in her arms.

"No one wanted to help," Quinn says. "The nearest hospital was miles away along a very dangerous road. It was almost impossible to call for a helicopter since that was a low priority, and there was no medical help in the village. Suddenly, looking at her, I saw Michelangelo's Pietá — Mary holding her dead son in her arms. I found myself saying, 'I'll take him.'"

"Suddenly, others began stepping forward and she received all kinds of help. Unfortunately, her son did not live to make it to the hospital. He died as we drove him there, but I have never forgotten the picture of his suffering mother."

The instilling of Catholic moral thinking — the stark lines between good and evil — also allowed Quinn to recognize

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the specter of absolute evil when he saw it. Living in a village near the Cambodian border, he was the first to report on the burning villages and horrific reports of life under a group called the Khmer Rouge and its ruthless leader, Pol Pot. As the refugees flowed over into Viet Nam, Quinn began to learn about starvation and need. In later years, he would help a delegation through the mind-numbing shock of the sight of 30,000 starving Cambodian refugees.

"It was a scene from the seventh circle of Dante's Inferno," he says. "Fifty to a hundred people were dying every day in this camp that was in an open field. On the way home, the delegation couldn't talk about anything else."

A group of Des Moines religious leaders led by Bishop Maurice Dingman asked Governor Robert Ray to help the refugees. Quinn raised \$600,000 from across the state of Iowa. He then connected with a priest through Catholic Relief Services living in Thailand near the border where the refugees from Cambodia and North Viet Nam were trying to shelter. Food and medical supplies from Iowa reached the refugees on Christmas Day in time to prevent further suffering and loss of life.

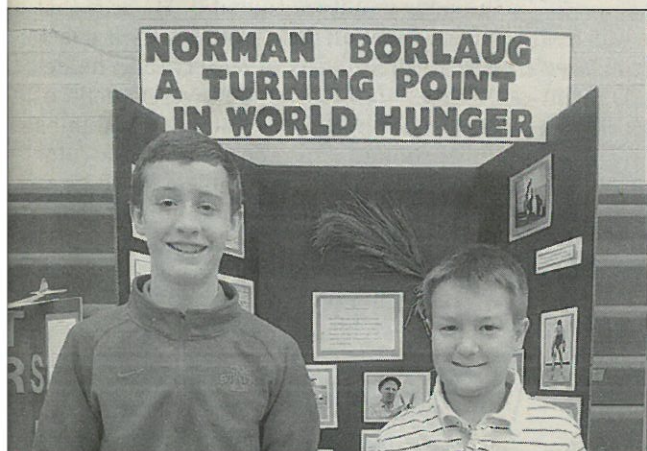
But just like Catholic teachers, Quinn knew a slower process was needed. "We defeated that evil, foul regime with roads," he says. "That is the lesson of Iowa to the world. When you build roads, you bring food and it uplifts people out of poverty. It brought technology and hope. It took a while — years — but that is what finally defeated one of the most genocidal regimes of the 20th century. It wasn't troops, it was roads."

Looking back, would he be a government employee again or would he rather be "Perry Mason?"

"Government service is a worthy thing," he says. "In your life, you look back and ask yourself, 'Did I make a difference?'"

Placing Catholic social teaching firmly in front of him, there is little doubt that Ambassador Ken Quinn has.

Dr. Kenneth M. Quinn, former U.S. Ambassador to the Kingdom of Cambodia, assumed the leadership of the World Food Prize Foundation on January 1, 2000, following his retirement from the State Department after a 32 year career in the Foreign Service.



Learning to Serve

