

A Tribute To
John Ruan, Sr.

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John Ruan was born in a very small town, but he never knew how to think small.

Even in the heart of the depression, when he was forced to drop out of school and support his family, following the death of his father, John was constantly looking for ways to grow, to expand, to do more. He combined uncommon vision, intense focus and the willingness to work incredibly long hours in a way that invariably led to dramatic change, significant progress and added benefit to his community.

This was first seen in John's work in building Ruan Transportation. Starting with one used pickup truck in 1930, John tripled his fleet size in just a few months by simply outthrusting and outlasting everyone else around. By World War II, his tenacity and ability to get things done led to his appointment as a regional transportation coordinator in the massive logistics efforts so critical to keeping our military machine functioning. And, following the war, John's trucking empire continued to expand, providing jobs for thousands and helping America meet the transportation needs of a generation now traveling on the interstate highways, through a fleet that now numbered more than 20,000 trucks.

John's vision extended to his home community as well. As American cities expanded into the suburbs, downtowns – once the only hubs of commerce in a city – went through a crisis of relevance, as businesses moved out to new shopping malls and belt highways. Again, John thought big – and acted even larger. Despite being told he could not make it work, John built the Ruan Center Office Complex in the heart of downtown Des Moines; a dramatic signal of confidence and renewed spirit, just when many were ready to give up on the downtown area. And, just like that fictional Iowa visionary from a small town, John proved the move adage true: "If you build it, they will come." And come they did, to fill his new office towers and the Marriott Hotel he erected – towering symbols of the dynamism that he was imparting to the urban landscape, all connected by the skywalk system he pioneered.

But, perhaps John's greatest legacy will not be his efforts on behalf of his local community, nor what he did to support her alma mater, Iowa State University, or his generosity to the struggle against MS, or even what he did to assist his country during World War II. Rather, it may be what he has done to uplift suffering people all around the globe through his endowment of the World Food Prize. Most persons, when they learn about the World Food Prize, find it improbable that a "truck driver" from Beacon, Iowa, would have the inclination to be involved in a project that aims to reduce malnutrition, alleviate hunger and end starvation. But, that is only because they didn't know John and weren't aware of his vision – about how big he thought and how far he could see. While several decades ago, most of us were still mired down in the problems of the 20th century, John was already looking far into the 21st. And what he saw troubled him deeply. The rapidly expanding global population, combined with the rate at which good land was being lost to agricultural production through erosion and urban sprawl, was, to him, a formula for a human catastrophe. John believed Iowa must be at the forefront of averting this tragedy. And so, when Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Dr. Norman E. Borlaug came to see him in 1990, John Ruan once again thought big. Dr. Borlaug's fledgling World Food Prize, in existence only two or three years, was about to disappear for lack of support. John saw The Prize as a unique way to reach around the world to impact all of these problems. He realized that the World Food Prize could inspire and recognize exceptional breakthrough achievements wherever they occurred in expanding the quality, quantity and availability of food. But as with everything he touched, John would take a good idea and make it better. He increased the amount of The Prize to a quarter of a million dollars. He then added a world-class Symposium which brought participants from all around the globe to Des Moines to discuss cutting-edge issues in global food security. Finally, reflecting his passion for education, John added a Youth Institute which now brings students and teachers from over 100 high schools together with World Food Prize Laureates, and then offers international research experiences to more than a dozen of these young people at leading agricultural research centers in Asia, Africa and Latin America, as Borlaug-Ruan interns.

Given John Ruan's tenacity, I fully expect that one hundred years from now a ceremony will be held at the Iowa State Capitol to present the World Food Prize to the 2110 Laureate. Experts from all around the globe will gather at the World Food Prize Hall of Laureates in the old Des Moines Library Building, which John and his family have preserved. And, Borlaug-Ruan Interns will be off to study in China or Brazil or Ethiopia. Iowa will still be the epicenter of intellectual exchange about global food issues, and will still be able to lay claim to the title of World Food and Agricultural Capital – thanks in large part because John Ruan just didn't know how to think small.