2025 Norman E. Borlaug International Dialogue
Session Title: A Life, A Legacy: The Leadership and Vision of John Ruan III
Date: October 23, 2025

Speakers

- Cynthia Hardin Milligan, Member, World Food Prize Foundation Board of Directors
- Rachel Ruan McLean, Vice Chair, World Food Prize Foundation Board of Directors

Transcript

Rachel Ruan McLean:

Good morning. I'm so grateful to be with you here today among such distinguished guests in remembrance of my father, John Rouhan the third. My dad, who served as chairman of the World Food Prize Foundation for twenty years, was a businessman and a philanthropist. He was driven by purpose, guided by compassion, and devoted to strengthening the World Food Price Foundation and the global mission it serves. Whether for business or philanthropy, my father had a keen ability to bring the right individuals to a project or cause.

He understood that progress was rarely achieved alone. Rather, it takes collaboration to improve communities, solve issues, and turn vision into reality. Our next speaker is someone my father valued tremendously as a leader, and he recruited her to join the board of the World Food Prize Foundation at its inception. Cynthia Harden Milligan is a respected business leader, attorney, educator, and advocate. Someone who has spent her career not just navigating the complexities of law and economics, but also shaping the institutions and the individuals around her for the better.

As the former dean of the College of Business Administration at the University of Nebraska Lincoln, Cynthia brought integrity and an entrepreneurial spirit to higher education, guiding countless students and faculty to pursue excellence with purpose. Her career spans from legal practice to regulatory leadership, including serving as the director of banking and finance for the state of Nebraska, and as an adviser to federal institutions on financial policy and reform. Beyond the public sector, she has served on the boards of major US corporations, bringing insight, strategy, and a steady moral compass to each organization she serves. But beyond

the many impressive titles and accomplishments, what truly sets Cynthia apart is her belief in people, her commitment to mentorship, ethical leadership, and lifting up others. She is a rare combination of intellect and heart, of strength and grace.

Over the years, Cynthia and my father shared a deep respect and admiration for one another's leadership, integrity, and commitment to service. Her thoughtful guidance and unwavering support as a member of the World Food Prize Foundation's Board of Directors and Council of Advisors have been invaluable to its continued success. Today, it is my great privilege and honor to introduce such an extraordinary and inspiring leader, someone who is truly treasured by our entire family. Please join me in welcoming to the stage Cynthia Hardin Milligan.

Cynthia Milligan:

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you Rachel for those fulsome comments, but at this time we are here to honor a visionary leader whose impact resonates not just across Iowa, but throughout the nation and the world, John Ruan III. John Ruan III exemplified leadership at the highest level, serving as chairman of the United States Chamber of Commerce, where his strategic insight and commitment to American enterprise helped guide businesses through times of change and opportunity. His influence extended deeply into the financial world through his leadership of Bankers Trust here in Iowa, growing it into the largest privately owned financial institution in Iowa, and then expanding into several other states. In transportation, John's stewardship of the Ruan Transportation Management Systems showcased his ability to innovate and expand trucking services on a national scale. Yet amid this growth, he never lost sight of what truly mattered, his employees.

He valued them not just as a part of the company, but as the heart of its success. Fostering a culture of respect, integrity, and dedication. John's passion extended beyond business. His pivotal role in growing the World Food Foundation reflects his deep commitment to global food security and agricultural innovation. Through this he positioned Iowa as a beacon of hope and progress in addressing one of humanity's greatest challenges.

His contributions to this cause reflect a deep compassion and a vision for a better nourished world. John was very intelligent. He loved to read and history was a favorite

topic. He wasn't an outgoing person. He usually liked working behind the scenes while making others take the credit.

He made it happen. Not only did he make it happen in his businesses and in the World Food Prize, but as I have stated also in his community. It was John's vision that saw the possibilities in the beautiful but aging city library located on the river in the heart of Des Moines and transformed it into the stunning World Food Prize headquarters that it is today. And we can thank John's wife Janice along with John for planning and developing the stunning World Food Prize Gardens. It's also their leadership and generosity that are responsible for the lovely planters of flowers that we've all been enjoying in the downtown area this past week and the flowers coming in from the airport to downtown, as well as the Des Moines Botanical Gardens, which if you haven't been to see, they're stunning.

Beyond his professional achievements, John Ruan III was a devoted husband, father of two, and grandfather of five. His family was his foundation, inspiring his values and enriching his life with love and purpose. All of the Ruan children and grandchildren share John and Janice's concern for people and their welfare, for their community, their state of Iowa, this country, and the world. Both of the Ruan children and their spouses are continuing very ably to lead the Ruan businesses and philanthropies. So today we celebrate a man whose legacy is etched in the halls of commerce, in the highways of America, in the fields of Iowa and the world, and in the hearts of all of us who were fortunate enough to have known him.

Thank you.