2025 Norman E. Borlaug International Dialogue
Session Title: LOL-aureate: A Youth Alum's 10-Minute Take
Date: October 23, 2025

Speakers

- Donald Gee | World Food Prize Foundation Youth Programs Alum and Comedian

Transcript
Donald Gee:

World Food Prize, how are we doing? Can make some noise real quick? Thank you all so much for coming out. This is a very unique room to do comedy in. Looking around, this might be the oldest average age crowd I have ever performed for, I think.

But, no, I'm so honored to be here at the World Food Prize. Some of you are probably wondering why is a comedian speaking at the World Food Prize? And, from the age of about eight to 18, I was able to go to the World Food Prize every single year. I had the privilege of participating in the Youth Programs, whether it was the Iowa Youth Institute, the Global Youth Institute or the Borlaug Ruan programs. And looking at my career currently, I think it makes a lot of sense because I think what Dr. Borlaug was hoping with all that time, effort and energy from global leaders pouring into young people was to create another comedian.

So, I'm so honored to be here. But truly the real comedic talent in the room is actually Ambassador Quinn who is backstage. Can we get up for Ambassador Quinn everybody? Growing up, I got to see him speak every year at the World Food Prize, and I learned one of the most important comedic lessons, which is, if they don't laugh at your joke, you still can. And I think he might be the king of that.

We have Mashal here in the front row. Thank you so much, Mashal. Can we get up for everyone at the World Food Prize for making this happen? All the volunteers, the staff, pulling this off every year is incredible. I've learned so much about leadership from Mashal.

I never actually had the chance to work for her, but I have always felt like she is my boss. And if anyone's ever worked with her, you understand exactly what I mean. She

is quite the leader. So thank you all so much for being here. The youth programs had an incredible impact on me, on my understanding of agriculture, international relations, but also learning lessons like the importance of putting yourself in the room.

And so I wanna tell you a story about my time as a Borlaug-Ruan Intern with that. So, at the age of 19, the World Food Prize flew me across the globe to Nepal, the International Center for Integrated Mountain Development, and I learned so much about agriculture and research while I was there, but I had a three-day weekend where I had some time off, and I didn't really have any plans because obviously I didn't know anyone who was there. And I saw a flyer for a giant gathering of scouts, the equivalent of scouts there in Nepal.

And I was an Eagle Scout here in the United States. And I was like, oh, I would love to go to that. So I reached out, emailed, called, couldn't get in touch, couldn't get a ticket. And the morning of, I woke up and I was like, why don't I just try and go and see if I can get in? And so I got on a bus.

It was about 70 miles across the country. And I thought, you know what? It's gonna be a two-hour drive there. If I can't get in, I'll just come back and have the weekend to myself. And what I'd forgotten being from Iowa was that there are mountains in Nepal.

In fact, some of the biggest mountains in the world. And that two-hour drive, thirteen-hours later, I arrived in the middle of the night. I got a hotel, woke up the next morning. I was like, okay, I'm gonna really gonna try and get in to make this worth it, and as I step out of the hotel, I saw security everywhere there were military helicopters flying around, and I was like what is happening for scouts in Nepal? And I asked someone. I was like, hey, like, what is going on today? And they're like, well, the prime minister of Nepal is going to be speaking to scouts. And I was like, oh, no. Like, there is no way I'm gonna get in now. But, again, I thought, you know what?

Like, I might as well just try and put myself in the room and see what happens. So I walk up to the front gate, and there are probably four guards on either side, armed guards at this gate. I just walk up. They start to approach. I look at them.

I'm like, namaste. They looked at me, and they were like, namaste. And just let me walk straight through. And so I'm at this event. I have a guitar strapped to my back to pass the time and kids see me with the guitar and they start running up. They're like hey Justin Bieber play us a song, and so I obliged. I had a great time. I ended up playing music for an hour with these kids. They would play songs from Nepal. I would play Justin Bieber. And after a little bit, like, it started to attract some attention because, like, in Iowa, I'm mildly tall. In Nepal, I was just like a white thumb in a sea of people. And I saw the organizer tent flap up and two people walk out, and I was like, oh, no. I'm gonna get kicked out and gotta go back on this thirteen hour bus ride.

And they walk up to me and they were like, who are you? And I was like, I'm Donald from America. And they were like, Donald, like the duck or the president? And I was like, you choose. And they were like, duck.

And I was like, cool. And they were like, how would you like to meet the prime minister of our country? And I was like, I thought I was getting kicked out. I'll do anything you want. So they took me to the end of this quarter of a mile long track that they built to welcome the prime minister to this event.

It was lined with kids, with flowers, balloons, everything. And they put me at the very end with a balloon. It just had me stand there. And thirty minutes later, I see a helicopter circle one or two times. It lands.

The prime minister of Nepal steps out, and it is like he's being welcomed into heaven. Just flowers flying, balloons in the air, people crying and they had taught me how to say hello prime minister in Nepali, which is, “Namaste Pradhana Mantri.” And I was like, when do I say this? What is the right time? And so as he's walking, he's getting closer and closer and closer.

He starts to almost pass by, and the person who was helping me nudged me was like, hey, hey, hey, say it now, say it loud. So I just scream out, “Namaste Pradhana Mantri.” And everyone goes silent. The prime minister of Nepal stops, turns around, looks at me and goes, “hello, white man,” and then invites me on stage with him.

And so I got to spend the rest of the day with him at this event. It was pretty incredible. And my time is almost up, but I just wanna say that truly is the power of putting yourself in the room. I wanna thank Mashal and everyone here, all the

experts, the leaders for letting young people be in the room here because it truly does change our lives. Thank you all so much, and have a great time.