

White House Rural Champions of Change Are ISU Extension Partners

Written by Joy Venhorst
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AMES, Iowa -- An Iowa biology professor and an Illinois educator were named Rural Champions of Change by the White House in recognition of their innovations and ingenuity that are strengthening rural communities. Linda Barnes, Marshalltown Community College (MCC) professor of biology and organic farmer, is the founder of the Entrepreneurial and Diversified Agriculture program at MCC, the first associate degree program in sustainable agriculture in the Midwest. Ruth Hambleton, of Woodlawn Illinois, is the founder of Annie's Project, a nonprofit organization that concentrates on education for farm women. Both women have Iowa State University Extension and Outreach support for their educational programs.

Barnes and Hambleton joined 16 other [Champions of Change](#), President Obama and Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack for a roundtable summit at the White House on July 6. A highlight of the meeting for both women was meeting the President and having conversation that generated many ideas. "I learned what others are doing around the development of local food hubs where regionally produced agricultural products are being aggregated for distribution," said Barnes.

Hambleton was proud to see over half the hands in the room go up in positive response when she asked how many knew about Annie's Project, and even more pleased when a fellow champion provided a testimonial for the program. "When others speak on behalf of Annie's Project, it lends credibility beyond what I could bring to the table," said Hambleton. "Annie's Project survives and grows because it is a demand driven program meeting a very real need for farm women."

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Sharing vision for rural America

President Obama shared his vision for economic growth and development in rural areas during the summit. The President emphasized the need for high-speed Internet access and stated that rural areas should expect to have opportunities equivalent to those in other areas of the nation. The President also discussed the importance of identifying rural Americans' success stories and sharing that knowledge across the country.

For Barnes, the summit broadened an awareness of the changes occurring in the perception of place and food. "I'd like to see the Farm Bill name changed to Food and Farm Bill, because that is how the U.S. feeds itself," she said. "The government needs to remove barriers to growing different crops – such as fruits and vegetables. There is a huge disincentive for alternative crops, and yet the U.S. doesn't grow enough fruits and vegetables to feed our own citizens the five-a-day that we know we need for good health."

The vision Hambleton shared was based in part on the Preamble to the Constitution. "I feel it sums up the purpose of government; establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of Liberty," she said. "To promote general welfare, the government has a role to support action that improves conditions for citizens of the U.S. That support can be in the form of regulation to promote fair play or can be fiscal support to get something started that otherwise would not happen."

Continuing the work of rural champions

Participating in the summit gave Hambleton a chance to thank the source of Annie's Project funding and ask for continued targeted support for the program. "New states introducing Annie's Project are grateful for grant funding sources and then are excited about the results this program generates for their states," Hambleton said. "I illustrated with real names and faces from the ranks of Iowa State University, names familiar to Secretary Vilsack, how important and impactful designated funding would be for taking education for farm and ranch women to the next level."

Hambleton went on to say that Iowa State University Extension and Outreach is the reason Annie's Project went beyond the borders of Illinois. Along with help from the University of

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Missouri the program has expanded to farm women business management education being offered in 26 states. “We also received help from the ISU Foundation to formalize our organizational structure, allowing us to move ahead to make Annie’s something more than a good idea in our heads,” she said. “Farm women across the country can look to Iowa State for a continued excellent program that will become for farm women what 4-H is to youth.”

Barnes said she appreciates the Iowa State University research and outreach that supports regional food systems and consumer education on the health benefits of eating locally. She would like to see research on cropping systems that work for fruits and vegetables.

Find out more about the Rural Champions of Change and read blog posts from Hambleton and Barnes at www.whitehouse.gov/champions/blog . Learn more about the Annie’s Project at www.extension.iastate.edu/annie and the Entrepreneurial and Diversified Agriculture Program at www.iavalley.edu/mcc/careers_degrees/images/EntreDiversifiedAgM.pdf