

USD grad Tom Brokaw earns Medal of Freedom

By Randy Dockendorf
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For decades, NBC journalist Tom Brokaw has covered history in the making. However, the Yankton and Pickstown native admits to being taken aback at a recent event featuring him.

Brokaw, a Yankton High School and University of South Dakota graduate, was honored last month as a 2014 recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom. President Barack Obama announced the 19 award winners.

"The Presidential Medal of Freedom was unexpected and very gratifying," Brokaw told the Press & Dakotan. "As many of my Yankton friends reminded me, it is a long way from YHS to the podium in the East Room of the White House to receive the nation's highest civilian award."

President John F. Kennedy established the award in 1963. The U.S. president bestows the medal, which is the nation's highest civilian honor.

he award is presented to individuals who have made especially meritorious contributions to the security or national interests of the United States, to world peace or to cultural or other significant public or private endeavors.

Brokaw said his life remains shaped by his youth, which was tied to construction of the Missouri River dams. He spent his childhood in Pickstown while his father worked on Fort Randall Dam, then his teenage years in Yankton while his father worked on Gavins Point Dam.

Brokaw has remained true to his South Dakota roots, frequently visiting the state. He returned to Pickstown this summer for an all-school and community reunion, including dedication of the Pickstown and Fort Randall Dam museum.

Brokaw told the Press & Dakotan he recalled those fond youthful memories during the Presidential Medal of Freedom ceremony.

"As I stood there, I reflected on my good fortune of having been raised in (South Dakota) by Mother and Dad — Jean and Red Brokaw — in working class communities such as Pickstown before moving to Yankton with its great school system (and its) vibrant business and social culture," he said.

Brokaw and his wife, the former Meredith Auld, are both YHS and USD graduates.

"For me, the life-changing moment was meeting Meredith and somehow persuading her we could have an adventurous life together," he added.

Receiving Recognition

President Obama named Brokaw among the 19 recipients, including six receiving the award posthumously. Composer Stephen Sondheim couldn't attend the White House ceremony and will be recognized at next year's event.

In his Presidential Medal of Freedom ceremony remarks, Obama cited one of Brokaw's many historic journalistic moments — a time when he scooped other media.

"On the night that the Berlin Wall fell, only one American network anchor was there reporting live," the president said. "A reporter remembers (executive editor) Ben Bradlee standing in the (Washington) Post newsroom, watching Tom Brokaw at the Brandenburg Gate and wondering aloud, 'How do we beat that? Brokaw's got this.'"

Brokaw became a face — and voice — that viewers sought for both the everyday news and defining moments, Obama said.

"At pivotal moments, Tom got it," the president



President Barack Obama presents the Medal of Freedom to journalist Tom Brokaw during a ceremony in the East Room of the White House Nov. 24, in Washington. The Medal of Freedom is the country's highest civilian honor.

OLIVIER DOULIERY/ABACA PRESS/TNS

said. "He reported on Watergate, snuck a camera into Tiananmen Square, sat down for the first one-on-one with Mikhail Gorbachev by an American TV reporter, (and) covered every presidential election since 1968.

"We've welcomed him into our homes at dinnertime and Sunday mornings. We've trusted him to tell us what we needed to know and to ask the questions that needed asking. I know, because I've been on the receiving end of some of those questions. ... Many know him as the chronicler of the 'Greatest Generation,' and today, we celebrate him as one of our nation's greatest journalists."

A military aide read the following citation as Brokaw received his medal.

"One of our Nation's most admired journalists, Thomas J. Brokaw has helped Americans better understand the world and each other. From 'Today,' to 'NBC Nightly News,' to 'Meet the Press,' Americans have relied on his authoritative reporting and keen analysis for decades.

"At moments of great

consequence — from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 — he was our nation's eyes and ears at the scene. He has lent his voice to our Nation's heroes, from The Greatest Generation to the latest generation of service members and their families.

"Thomas J. Brokaw's work remains the model of responsible journalism, and his insights continue to enrich our public discourse."

The White House news release listed Brokaw as "one of America's most trusted and respected journalists." Brokaw served as anchor of "NBC Nightly News" from 1982 to 2004, and he is currently a special correspondent for NBC News.

The release noted: "His reporting has been recognized by the Edward R. Murrow Lifetime Achievement Award, two Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Awards, 11 Emmys and two Peabody awards. Mr. Brokaw previously served as anchor of NBC's 'Today,' and following the death of his close friend Tim Russert,

Mr. Brokaw took over 'Meet the Press' during the 2008 campaign season."

Brokaw has written five books, including "The Greatest Generation," a title that gave name to those who served in World War II at home and abroad.

"The Greatest Generation" included a section featuring the late Howard "Hod" Nielsen of Yankton, a World War II veteran.

Nielsen served as a reconnaissance pilot who gained vital information leading to the Normandy invasion. Nielsen later received state and national recognition as Press & Dakotan sports editor and as KYNT radio sportscaster.

The Class of 2014

In a White House news release, Obama described the 2014 Presidential Medal of Honor recipients as "bold, inspiring Americans."

"From activists who fought for change to artists who explored the furthest reaches of our imagination; from scientists who kept America on the cutting

edge to public servants who help write new chapters in our American story, these citizens have made extraordinary contributions to our country and the world," he said.

Besides Brokaw and Sondheim, the other 2014 recipients include actress Meryl Streep, singer Stevie Wonder, social activist Ethel Kennedy, author Isabel Allende, actress Marlo Thomas, Native American activist Suzan Shown Harjo, golfer Charles Sifford, economist Robert Solow, physicist Mildred Dresselhaus, former Rep. Abner Mikva (D-Ill.) and retiring Rep. John Dingell (D-Mich.), the longest-serving member of Congress.

Three of the medals were awarded posthumously to civil rights activities James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, who were murdered in 1964 while working in Mississippi.

The other posthumous awards were presented to choreographer Alvin Ailey; U.S. Rep. Patsy Mink (D-Hawaii), and U.S. Rep. Edward Roybal (D-Calif.), who founded the Congressional Hispanic Caucus.

For Brokaw, the Presidential Medal of Freedom was made even more special by sharing it with his family.

"Our three daughters and five grandchildren were in the White House when the medal was awarded, giving me fist bumps and posing with the President for photos," he said.

The occasion was once in a lifetime, even for Brokaw, who has covered many U.S. presidents and major world events.

"(It was) a day to remember," he said.

You can follow Randy Dockendorf on Twitter at twitter.com/RDockendorf. Discuss this story at www.yankton.net.

United States, Cuba re-connect; Agriculture may benefit from team-up

By Rob Nielsen
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South Dakota's agriculture industry may soon benefit from the easing of one of the last remaining Cold War flashpoints.

Last week, it was announced that the United States and Cuba would re-establish direct diplomatic relations that have been severed for decades. Among the implications of the end of the embargo is the potential for increased trade between the two nations.

Matt Sibley, legislative specialist with the South Dakota Farmers Union, said the announcement could be a positive for the state's farming community.

"Anytime that we can open up some markets, I think it's going to be a good thing for our farmers — especially in years like this where we have some bumper crops," Sibley said. "Anytime you have those types of events, the idea and the prospect of having more places to push that product are definitely going to be beneficial."

He said there will be a number of opportunities for the sale of grain products.

"Cuba's going to be a good market for a lot of the products here," he said. "The United States alone produces around 40 percent of the corn crop and South Dakota makes up a good portion of that. I think the implications are strong that we're going to have some good opportunities with the relations being normalized."

South Dakota Secretary of Agriculture Lucas Lentsch told the Press and Dakotan that the easing of travel restrictions will further boost the potential for exports to Cuba.

"One of the opportunities that

continues to unfold for Cuba is its tourism industry is going to increase, which ultimately drives up food and demand for food in the country," Lentsch said.

He added that the island nation relies heavily on food imports.

"Historically, Cuba has been on the receiving end — or wanting to import — cereal grains, corn, soy, edible beans, chicken, milk powder," he said. "Cuba, in terms of food, imports somewhere in the neighborhood of 60-80 percent — I've seen mixed reports of how much food they actually import today — and that's quite a bit."

Sibley said the agricultural potential of the Cuban market also extends to the state's livestock.

"They're going to be eager to get a hold of the genetics we have within our cattle, our sheep and our hogs," he said. "That alone is just going to entice the Cuban livestock producers, so we're definitely optimistic about that."

Lentsch said it's too early to know exactly how much of a role South Dakota producers will have, stating it ultimately comes down to what the country's needs are.

"To what extent it's going to be specific to South Dakota commodities or value-added agriculture opportunities is to be determined yet," he said. "As the growing global demand for animal protein increases, South Dakota — between our poultry and our pork production and dairy and beef production — will have the benefit of those markets as well. It comes down to what the local demand is.

... As we look at Cuba, (we'll ask), 'What are they going to be looking for?' — the local trends they like to have access to. I think when you look at poultry, pork production and beef production, all of those would have a very strong market



The Agriculture industry may benefit from a new USA, Cuba connection

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presence within Cuba."

Lentsch said that, in addition to helping provide food for the Cuban people, the restructuring of diplomatic relations could also benefit Cuban farmers.

"Part of what will also be (accessible) for the Cuban economy is technology," he said. "Modern agricultural practices will allow them to take advantage of some of their cropping capacity within the country themselves."

With the easing of restrictions on trade with a market that has been closed off for so many years, there's also a lot of unknowns going forward. Sibley said it'll be important to assess the trade climate before entering into trade agreements.

"We have to realize the proof is ultimately going to be in the pudding, so to speak," he said. "We have to make sure that the trade is

going to be fair. That's one of the biggest concerns. While it's great to open up new markets, we just want to make sure that we don't take a back seat and that, in terms of trade negotiation, we are in a fair and balanced situation."

Lentsch said a lot will have to occur at the federal level as well before trade can really take off between the two countries.

"One of the most important things that needs to take place, first and foremost, is getting our federal policy in alignment to opening up the dialogue with Cuba," he said. "That's going to require Congress working with our foreign ag service, getting an embassy in place — all of those are very critical components of having a successful relationship in trade relations."

The move to restore relations hasn't come without some criticism. Sibley said despite the

controversy, it's still worth pursuing both the potential financial and diplomatic benefits.

"I think it's worth it to our producers here in the state to give it a shot," he said. "This has the potential to be a really good thing, not only for the producers here in the United States, but also the producers here specifically in South Dakota. That, coupled with the idea that we really should be working on improving relations with other nations — those two things in congruence are enough to at least give it a shot to see if we can make this work out for the betterment of both the Cuban people and the people here in the United States and South Dakota."

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