

Learning and fun at the IFAJ Congress 2011 in Canada

Lloyd Phillips

Wow! How else can I describe my being selected as an Alltech/IFAJ Young Leader in Agricultural Journalism other than to say that it was one of the proudest moments in my life?

And to add the cherry on the top, receiving this award meant that I, and nine other Young Leaders from countries around the world, had our accommodation and meals, tours, the training boot camp, and our attendance at the main 2011 IFAJ Congress, all in stunning Canada, paid for through the generosity of Alltech International and by the sponsorship-seeking of the IFAJ Committee.

I know that it may sound like I'm going overboard with my description of how fantastic my IFAJ 2011 experience was in September 2011. However, if you were there, if you have ever been to a previous IFAJ Congress, or if you are blessed enough to ever attend a future one, you will fully appreciate just how awesome the whole thing is.

Yes, travelling to Canada was a long and tiring undertaking, but it's amazing how quickly the tiredness disappeared as soon as I began meeting my fellow Young Leaders, members of the master class, and the leadership and support staff of the IFAJ. The excitement of being able to attend not only the boot camp and the IFAJ 2011 Congress, but to be surrounded by people who share the exact same interests in international agricultural journalism as myself, was a rejuvenating breath of fresh air. Once the ice was broken on the first evening with the help of some delicious Canadian beers, the boot camp participants very quickly began forging friendships among themselves and our hosts that are likely to last for many years to come.

While we boot campers had plenty of time to get to know each other better in a social environment over the following nine days, we were also in Canada to learn more about international agricultural journalism as well as to hone our writing skills under the guidance of top lecturers and instructors. For the first two full days in Guelph, Ontario province, we were instructed in subjects as diverse as finding our personal personality types and then utilising these to best professional effect, the state of press freedom in various parts of the world and its implications, and the importance of modern social media in effective agricultural journalism. Each lesson was structured to provide an educational outcome in a fun learning environment. Many laughs were shared as we learned how to be the best that we can be in agricultural journalism.

Adding to the fun and interesting experience for the boot campers was the fact that the IFAJ 2011 leadership and organisers made sure that we were not simply confined to a classroom for the duration of our lessons, but that we also learned out in the field – in a number of cases under unusual circumstances. In one case we visited a working farm that also allows “townie” families to spend a day on the property learning about the valuable role that agriculture plays in feeding the world. The tourists can also pick their own crops for own consumption before paying for them at the exit. Another trip was to a local Guelph restaurant that prides itself on sourcing ingredients directly from farmers within a 100 kilometre radius to reduce carbon emissions and to guarantee the freshness and quality of the products used in the restaurant. I'm sure that not many students around the world can say that they were allowed to have an ice-cold beer on the table while learning about the importance that an increasing number of Canadian restaurateurs are placing on establishing strong, direct and mutually beneficial relationships with farmers.

Following the two days of the boot camp came the IFAJ 2011 Congress. Hundreds of delegates from around the world descended on Guelph to participate. While I initially found the large crowds of initially total strangers to be slightly intimidating, this feeling was soon changed once I began meeting many of them on a one-on-one basis. What a fantastically friendly, encouraging and supportive bunch every single one of them was! Many of the congress delegates were veteran agricultural journalists who were more than happy to share their experiences with their younger colleagues, and who were extremely pleased to find out that international agricultural journalism was still capable of attracting and keeping young journalists of the calibre of the Alltech/IFAJ Young Leaders.

The IFAJ 2011 Congress was a learning experience in itself. Speakers informed delegates about a diverse range of agricultural and agricultural journalism topics. With beautiful Canada hosting the congress, it was a done deal that this exceedingly agriculturally progressive country would want to showcase its farming industry to journalists from around the world. Both in the congress main hall as well as on tours through part of Ontario's farming country, delegates learned about topics ranging from the more commonly known dairy and crop production to the much less well-known Canadian maple syrup and bison meat farming. Whatever the topics and subject matter were, each was highly informative and interesting in their own right. On the last night of the congress I was privileged enough to give a speech to delegates and sponsors on behalf of the Young Leaders, having been asked to do so by the IFAJ leadership. What should have been a daunting task for me, given that I'm not usually one for public speaking, turned out to be easy and fun thanks to the cheering and encouragement that I received from all of my new friends.

On the social side of the IFAJ 2011 Congress I can wholeheartedly say that the organisers and sponsors absolutely outdid themselves. Not only did boot campers and congress delegates have a much appreciated 'on the house' hospitality suite running every night after the formalities were over with for the day and where I was able to meet and chat with so many lovely people in a more relaxed atmosphere, but we were also taken to a hilarious stage show to learn about Canadian history and culture, as well as visiting the mighty and amazing Niagara Falls. The tour of the falls was one of the highlights of the sight-seeing, culminating with a quite scary but exhilaratingly wet boat ride into the thunder and mist almost at the foot of this internationally renowned natural wonder.

Having had a very busy nine or more days behind us, when the end of our trip to Canada arrived many of us were totally bushed and keen to get back to our loved ones back home. But this did not negate the sadness that we all, especially the boot campers, felt as we had to say our goodbyes to the very close friends that we had made among ourselves in such a short time. But what has sustained me is knowing that I will one day meet some, and hopefully all, of my 2011 Alltech/IFAJ Young Leaders in agricultural journalism again – hopefully sooner than later.

For my colleagues in South African agricultural journalism who qualify to enter the 2012 Alltech/IFAJ Young Leaders in Agricultural Journalism Awards competition, I urge you wholeheartedly to prioritise getting your entry in urgently. This year's boot camp and IFAJ Congress are being held in Sweden, and from what I've heard they promise to be as good, or even better, than the awesome Canadian IFAJ 2011 boot camp and congress. If you're not in it then you can't win it, and the South African membership and leadership of the IFAJ, namely Agricultural Writers SA, are great supporters of young agricultural journalists in this country. In fact, I would like to extend my sincerest thanks to the leadership of Agricultural Writers SA for, firstly, selecting me to be a finalist last year, and secondly, for their unwavering support in getting me to the 2011

Alltech/IFAJ boot camp and the congress. Given half a chance I would disappear to yonder Sweden in a heartbeat for this year's IFAJ 2012 Congress.



South Africa's Alltech-IFAJ 2011 Young Leader in Agricultural Journalism award winner, Lloyd Phillips, receives his trophy from Emily Kay, Marketing Manager: Canada for Alltech International, at the 2011 IFAJ Congress in Canada.