

Professor Rainer Gross, Benefactor to Humanity: A Tribute to his Legacy to Public Nutrition

In September 2010, Angela Cespedes and Aaron Lechtig were awarded the Rainer Gross Award for “Recent Innovation in Nutrition and Health in Developing Societies” by the Hildegard Grunow Foundation. The award was for the most outstanding innovation which represents the creativity for nutritional health solutions that typified the “Rainer Gross way of doing things.”

In this issue of the Bulletin, we are pleased to be publishing the article, “Social protection programs in Central America and the Dominican Republic: Do they have a nutritional dimension?” by Angela Cespedes, Aaron Lechtig, and Rachel Francischi; the work outlined in this paper was the basis for the Rainer Gross award.

The following is an excerpt of the remarks made by Aaron Lechtig at the II World Congress on Public Health Nutrition in Porto, Portugal on September 25, 2010 on his acceptance of the Rainer Gross Award.

Introduction

It is a great honor to share the awarding of the first Rainer Gross Prize: Recent Innovation in Nutrition and Health by the Hildegard Grunow Foundation with my colleague, Angela Cespedes. I would like to recognize the presence at this tribute to my friend, Rainer Gross, of Professor Ursula Gross, Rainer’s beloved wife and inseparable life partner. She was with her husband, day and night every step of the way, this during the good times in their youth and also during the bitter test of suffering during Rainer’s battle with cancer.

Rainer Gross was a natural-born leader, a master, colleague, teacher, companion, brother and a companion in the battle against poverty and malnutrition. I am grateful for having had the opportunity to work with him, and to discuss and learn so many insights from both Rainer and Ulla. We passed years of intense and pleasant mutual discovery.

My earliest encounters with the Gross family

I first met Rainer and Ulla on a drizzly morning in 1968, while the tanks of the army were carrying out another of the innumerable coup d’états in my homeland, Peru. To date, none of these “coups” has made any difference for resolving the basic national problems of poverty, inequality and undernutrition.

Rainer and Ulla were barely more than adolescents in 1968. They were like so many other couples that we saw in that era, touring around the whole of Peru. But, unlike other foreign couples, these two were completely dedicated to the cause of preventing undernutrition across our beautiful land.

At that time they had hung all their hopes of improving dietary protein intake for poor communities on food technology. Their proposed solution was very simple: to promote the consumption of protein from a marine alga (genus *Scenedesmus*) which was abundant along the Pacific coast of Peru, and thus so inexpensive as to be affordable to the lowest economic stratum of the population of the northern coastal desert region at the time. With its 2000 km of coastal extension, algae—like other fruits of the sea—were (and still are) very plentiful. Moreover, *Scenedesmus* is very rich in high-quality protein, approaching the biological value of bovine casein.

Let us remember that those were the days when malnutrition was synonymous with the “Protein Gap”—so much so that the unit of the United Nations in charge of world undernutrition was called the Protein Advisory Committee. Those were also the years when the interest of our colleagues at the Institute of Nutrition of Central America and Panama (INCAP) in Guatemala was focused on the results of another young and brilliant food technologist—namely, Dr. Ricardo Bressani. Ricardo had produced an inexpensive and high-quality plant-based protein source from the combination of

corn and cotton seed meal, which was known commercially as Incaparina®.

At that time, the worldwide strategy in the struggle against malnutrition was based on incrementing the production of Incaparina®-like vegetal protein mixtures and making them accessible to the poorest sectors within the neediest of societies. Based on the notable initial success of Incaparina®, similar products such as Colombarina and Peruvita and many other low-cost and high-quality protein mixtures proliferated, based on the same basic principle.

As such, Rainer and Ulla's idea of resolving Peru's malnutrition problem by generalizing the access to a high-quality protein was rightly within the prevailing paradigm of the most important factors in maternal and child undernutrition of the era. Rainer and Ulla were convinced that it would be enough to provide the aforementioned algal protein free of charge to the poor of Peru.

But, for many of us at the time, theirs seemed a crazy notion. Those were the times in Latin America of the rise of the tide of "*Fidelismo*" (adherence to the revolution of Cuba's Fidel Castro), and the new generation of university students sought to follow the call of Che Guevara and join in the historical struggle for Latin American liberation. So, from the beginning, we had a fundamental philosophical discrepancy. I adhered to a social point of view of fighting malnutrition, based on the (scarcely feasible at the time) concept of food as a human right, in contrast to Rainer and Ulla's pragmatic and highly feasible technological approach.

I was fascinated for the first time with Rainer's superb handling of the depth of technical understanding and his obvious personal commitment to combat malnutrition in Peru in whatever location and whatever

hour of the day or night. After their stint in my country, early in their life, it was time for them to return to Germany and continue with their doctoral studies. But, before leaving, Rainer confided in me that his greatest aspiration in life was to return to Peru some day to assist in the preparation of a new generation of nutritional leaders for a country, which desperately need them.

From that time, I have subscribed to the notion to prepare young leaders in the field of nutrition with great personal fervor and enthusiasm. I have used this basic strategy as far as possible to prepare young leaders and it has yielded favorable practical results in all parts of the developing world across which I have worked.

Final reflections on Rainer Gross

When the scientific community did not accept his notions, Rainer would say: "I am not wrong. What is wrong is the times. There will come a time when my colleagues will evolve and be prepared to agree with me."

Rainer, you and I have lived and fought together in memorable struggles and victories all across the World. With what voice, with what words, with what tribute, can I take leave of you, Rainer? I bid you goodbye, Rainer, my life-long friend, companion and teacher. I am grateful for your sharing your knowledge, your attitudes, your character, your decisiveness, your wisdom and your generosity. Knowing you as I do, Rainer, you must right now be fighting, in some part of Heaven, to improve and build human capacity up there.

—Aaron Lechtig