

DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI AWARD

Richard Rortvedt '69

Arlington, Virginia | International agricultural cooperation and development official, U.S. Department of Agriculture

PHOTOGRAPHED DURING HIS PILGRIMAGE WALK TO SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA IN SPAIN

During a thirty-two-year career working for the federal government, Richard Rortvedt pursued his lifelong goals to generate international good will and help feed the world. He served as an agricultural diplomat for the United States, helping other countries develop their agricultural potential while still benefiting American farmers and consumers.

Rortvedt started his national service with active duty in the U.S. Air Force five days after graduating from St. Olaf. Then he earned a master's degree in Latin American studies from the University of New Mexico, aiming to pursue a career in food and agriculture. He moved to Washington, D.C., and landed a job with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, where he specialized in Latin America.

Over the years, Rortvedt held ten different civilian jobs in the USDA and visited twenty-eight countries on official business. His career included leadership positions in the Office of International Cooperation and Development, where he worked on agricultural modernization and the Food for Peace program. He was director of global bilateral scientific exchanges, headed a trade and investment program, and served as the USDA's liaison to the Inter-American Development Bank. When Rortvedt retired, he was special assistant to the Foreign Agricultural Service's deputy administrator, providing support and advice on agricultural trade and development programs.

“My broad St. Olaf education helped prepare me to serve: in my career as a bridge between technical experts and policymakers, between developing and developed nations, and between cultures; in my volunteer work, I often help build bridges between hosts and guests, where those who provide hospitality are frequently blessed by becoming guests themselves.”

During Rortvedt's career he earned many honors, including the USDA's Superior Service Award for innovative, effective leadership in the Cancun Presidential Agricultural Task Forces and Caribbean Basin Initiative. He also received the Foreign Agricultural Service Administrator's Award for helping negotiate successful free-trade agreements that opened markets for U.S. agricultural products.

As a retiree, Rortvedt channels his passion for service into widespread volunteer work. He represents Costa Rica's Center for Tropical Agricultural Research and Higher Education (CATIE) in Washington and served for two years as its board president.

Rortvedt works devotedly toward social justice through ministries to homeless women at Luther Place Memorial Church in Washington and on the boards of the Lutheran Volunteer Corps and Steinbruck Center for Urban Studies.

Still today Rortvedt values his liberal arts education from St. Olaf, as well as its focus on ethical and moral behavior and service to church, society, and the global community. He chaired the gift committee for his fortieth reunion while also supporting the St. Olaf Music Department and Center for Experiential Learning, as well as the Washington, D.C.-area alumni club. 🦋

