



Briana McNeal serves rice in a school in H.D. Kote, India, where she studied the nutritional needs of women and children.

Photo: Rachel Farhat



Photos: Rachel Farhat

DREAMING BIG FROM THE FOOD NETWORK TO FOOD AID

By Barbara McBreen

BRIANA MCNEAL BELIEVES IN DREAMING BIG.

Before the junior in global resource systems and dietetics enrolled at Iowa State she thought she would become a famous chef like Emeril Lagasse. But now she feels she can help more people by teaching them how to cook and eat nutritiously.

“I wanted to own a fancy restaurant and use the profits to fund a gourmet soup kitchen, so people who couldn’t afford that food would be able to get it,” McNeal says. “Now, I think I can help more people by teaching them how to eat.”

In high school in Austin, Texas, McNeal listed the Nobel Peace Prize as one of her lifelong goals. When she moved to Ames she was delighted to hear about the World Food Prize ceremonies in Des Moines, an event she plans to attend someday.

Traveling to India has been a dream of McNeal’s since the second grade. That’s when her best friend’s mom, who was from India, dressed her in a saree as part of a class presentation. “It was the best moment of my life,” says McNeal.

Her dream to travel to India came true this summer when she spent four weeks

in Karnataka, India on a summer travel course. During her stay she and 12 other students studied the nutritional needs of women and children.

In an area where 46 percent of the children are malnourished, McNeal says their goal was to understand why. At one stop during the trip she served rice from a metal bucket to students attending a middle school. McNeal noticed that the students were much smaller than children the same age in the United States.

“We looked into whether they were having transportation or financial barriers,” McNeal says. “We also provided some cooking tips to increase nutrients.”

Cultural compliance was something her group also considered. Telling people to decrease rice and increase vegetables is easy, but since rice is an ingrained cultural tradition it’s not a simple change.

“They have no reason to listen to us because we have not lived in their shoes,” McNeal says.

The students also visited small farms. McNeal talked to one farmer who took home a

six-figure salary or 9 million rupees from just two acres. McNeal doesn’t have a farm background, so she says it was a valuable experience to talk to farmers.

Traveling through southern India was an inspiring and jaw-dropping experience for McNeal. At one stop she posed for a photo in front of a 300-year-old jackfruit tree. McNeal says the owner knew the name of his ancestor that planted the tree nine generations earlier.

This year she’s continuing to study India and plans to return to do her internship before she graduates. As part of her global resource systems major she’ll continue to monitor events in India’s southern region and learn the Hindi language. **S**

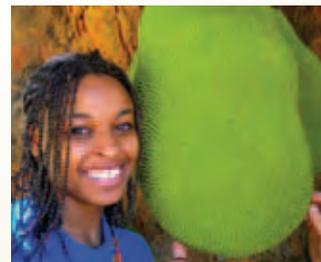


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Briana McNeal poses next to a 300-year-old jackfruit tree.