

African gala celebrates global education, leadership



RACHEL WOOD/Courtesy photo

Dancers and drummers from the Omaha-based African Culture Connection performed as guests entered the Gala Celebration of African Art, Cuisine and Fashion at the International International Quilt Study Center and Museum on Friday. The event was hosted by the Malaika Foundation and the College of Education and Human Sciences at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

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Dancers swayed their hips and waved their arms, musicians pounded the beat and guests filed into the Quilt House for a taste of Africa.

Inside, baskets from Kenya, wood carvings from Malawi and Nigeria, paintings, embroideries and masks decorated the tables and waited to be auctioned.

Student designers strutted, clad in homemade African dresses, as other students served Mango slush, Tibs from Ethiopia, Merguez Sausage, almond cookies and Kofta kabobs on silver platters.

Friday evening, the Quilt House at 33rd and Holdrege streets gave guests an authentic taste and celebration of Africa.

In a collaborative effort, the College of Education and Human Sciences at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln along with the Malaika Foundation, hosted an art gala and auction to raise

scholarship money for students to study abroad and celebrate J. Joe Ricketts' efforts with the 2013 Global Educator Award.

"The African gala brings Africa to Nebraska and you don't need a passport," said Dr. Natalie Hahn, Nebraska native, UNL graduate and Malaika Foundation founder who worked with the United Nations, primarily in Africa, for 40 years.

Guests, 380 of them, packed into the upper floor of the International Quilt Study Center and Museum, including Her Excellency, Madame Salma Kikwete, first lady of the United Republic of Tanzania, and her delegation.

Through his work promoting education in Africa, Ricketts—the founder benefactor and CEO of the Opportunity Education Foundation and founder of TD Ameritrade—helped a half a million children in 11 African countries, including Tanzania, over the years.

"He is making a difference in the lives of thousands and thousands of children. Not with pencils, notebooks and supplies, but with state of the art education," Hahn said.

The Malaika Foundation, a nonprofit, offers Nebraska primary and secondary teachers global educational resources and travel opportunities.

Money raised at the gala will return to the students in the form of scholarships for study abroad opportunities so they can expand their horizons and "feel what it's like to be out of Nebraska," said Marjorie Kostelnik, dean of the College of Education and Human Sciences.

Students in the college planned the event through two classes during each semester last year.

"I think it's a great way for students to grow and learn from a new perspective," said Leandra McLennon, a senior in the hospitality program and event coordinator.

Students researched traditional African cuisine, hired the African Culture Connection dancers and musicians, planned and executed the event.

"It became something bigger than I ever thought it would be," McLennon said.