



INTERNATIONAL
STUDENT HOUSE
washington, d.c.

Global Leadership Awards Dinner: Distinguished Alumni Award Presentation

Good evening ladies and gentlemen. My name is Zinhle Mkhabela. I am from South Africa (born and raised). I am a Masters student in the Department of International Relations at the University of the Witwatersrand (otherwise known as Wits) in Johannesburg. At the moment, I am attending George Washington University as an exchange student for the duration of the fall semester. This is my first time in the United States. In my short stay here, I have learned the following: you do not meet the Obamas on your first day in Washington; American food portions could satisfy a hungry bear and when you do your shopping, the statement, “that will be five dollars and sixty-nine cents” could induce a state of panic because...American coins! Perhaps the next time you debate which woman’s face deserves to be on a dollar bill; you should also consider the fact that some of us deserve the words “25 cents” on a quarter and “10 cents” on a dime.

So, it is indeed a privilege for me to be standing here today to present this award to such an accomplished man, Ambassador Geir Haarde of Iceland. I had the opportunity to meet the Ambassador earlier this week and what I can tell you from my brief personal encounter with him is that he is a man cloaked with humility. This is a powerful thing, especially in a leader and in Washington.

Like many of the students living at ISH, Ambassador Haarde arrived in the U.S. as a student. He completed his Bachelor’s degree at Brandeis University in Boston and he arrived at ISH in 1973. At that time, Ambassador Haarde was completing his Masters degree in International Relations at the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) at John Hopkins University. The Ambassador also holds a second Masters degree in Economics from the University of Minnesota. So, for my housemates who have been complaining about their first graduate mid-term exams this past week, take courage! It’s still a loooong road ahead. But, judging from the Ambassador’s story, your hard work will bear fruit.

Ambassador Haarde has held some of the following titles: Economist at the Central Bank of Iceland; Political Advisor to the Icelandic Minister of Finance; Member of Parliament for 22

years and Member of Cabinet for 11 of those years. At this stage, what you should be thinking is, “This guy is pretty impressive”. And I haven’t gotten to the good part yet. In the performing arts, we have something called a “triple threat”—a performer who excels at singing, acting and dancing. Ambassador Haarde is a kind of triple threat. He has served his country as Minister of Finance, Minister of Foreign Affairs and as Prime Minister. I am told that no other individual in the history of Iceland has held all three positions. So yes, ISH housemates, there is always hope. You too may one day lead a country; despite spending your Friday nights knocking back drinks at Front Page.

Living at ISH is a special thing and the Ambassador remembers his time here with great fondness. Many of us will. It is only at ISH that you are able to encounter Japan, Italy, Ireland, Mongolia, India, Trinidad and Tobago, Zimbabwe, China, Finland, Pakistan, Germany, France, Turkey, South Korea, the Netherlands, the Philippines etc. sitting across you at the dinner table and expanding your thinking about the world.

Ambassador Haarde, it is truly an honour to present this award to you. We are proud to have you as a member of the ISH Alumni—a most distinguished title. I think the most powerful thing you said to me during the course of our interview was in respect of the nature of a civilized system—it is one that cares for the marginalized, the poor, the disabled, the forgotten, with everyone making a contribution towards a just and equitable system.

Thank you for being an inspiration, Ambassador. Of course the fact that you bribed me with Icelandic chocolate and water from your natural springs at our first meeting helped me say all of these nice things about you...I didn’t need much encouragement. You’re awesome.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in congratulating the recipient of our Distinguished Alumni Award tonight, His Excellency, Geir H. Haarde.