



Science
Societies

Steinacher named 2021 ICCA of the Year

By Denice Rackley

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Todd Steinacher was named this year's CCA of the Year.

From a pumpkin patch in Carrolton, IL, to the other side of the world supporting farmers in Zambia, Africa, Todd Steinacher, the 2021 International CCA of the Year, is on a never-ending search for solutions to educate and assist farmers.

Planted firmly in rich Illinois soil, alongside the pumpkins he grew with his grandmother and father, Steinacher's passion for agronomy began taking root. "I knew before graduating high school that I wanted to work with farmers," Steinacher recalls.

With an associate degree in agriculture from Lincoln Land Community College and a bachelor's degree in agriculture science from Western Illinois University, Steinacher gained the knowledge to begin his agronomy journey. "Studying agronomy enabled me to be involved in agriculture and stay engaged with growers."

Working in an agronomy and sales position in the GROWMARK/FS System would influence Steinacher's career more than he could imagine. Fitting the pieces together and utilizing his knowledge in the field, Steinacher began having conversations with growers. Sampling soil, selling seed, and having conversations about crop nutrition and the problems customers were facing are some of the first memories of his career. "My 10 years with GROWMARK/FS System, learning beside incredible people and gaining experiences, laid the foundation for my career. I carry those lessons and friendships with me each day."

During that time, Steinacher connected with two gentlemen that he credits with shaping his unique approach to agronomy and his career. Steinacher's approach to conversations with farmers originated from Dr. Howard Brown, agronomy manager for Growmark. Mark Bauman, a coworker and later a supervisor with GROWMARK, taught him how to combine good agronomy and sales.

“Mark always places the customer first and approaches problems logically. He taught me by helping customers solve problems, products sell themselves. I admire Dr. Brown’s passion for agronomy and his ability to explain complex scientific topics leading to a thorough understanding and encouraging action.”

Known for digging deep into subjects and asking many questions, Steinacher was encouraged by Brown to attend graduate school. “I owe my master’s degree to Dr. Brown. He taught me how to have conversations about the science of agronomy with industry professionals and growers to ensure the science is understood at the application and production level.”

Education First

Breaking down complex topics, understanding fundamentals, and then passing that education to others is a theme that runs throughout Steinacher’s life. Academics during grade school and high school were a struggle for him. “My mom and I spent many long evenings at the dining room table where she would help me break down topics to learn the core lessons.”

Those struggles taught Steinacher to concentrate on the basics. “We accelerate ourselves in life by learning. College is not necessary for everyone, but learning and understanding how the world works and how things fit together helps you succeed.”

Concentrating on fundamentals creates a basis for knowledge that leads to greater understanding, Steinacher believes. This hard-earned lesson has stuck with him and continues to impact his daily interactions with professionals and growers.

As a regional agronomist for AgriGold, Steinacher is involved in product development and testing new corn hybrids and soybean varieties to determine if they fit into production systems for Illinois farmers. “We try to understand the requirements and

weaknesses of seed products to help farmers manage those challenges.” For Steinacher, everything circles back to education and solving a problem for growers.

“Todd is a very creative individual when it comes to educating others,” Brown says. Known to use every possible avenue to convey information, Steinacher texts photos with captions, shoots video, writes blogs, and even travels with his PowerPoint equipment to be prepared for impromptu opportunities should they arise.



In Africa, Steinacher collected soil samples and evaluated the limiting factors of the selected fields. Photo courtesy of Western Illinois University (<https://bit.ly/3gHpeSD>).

Advocating for Good Agronomy

It is no surprise that Steinacher sees his role, and the task of CCAs, as primarily an educator and advocate for good agronomy. “I have conversations with growers that help them make the best possible decisions.”

Those conversations span a wide range of issues. “Farmers need to have a wide base of information to be successful, necessitating CCAs possess a broad knowledge base as well,” Steinacher believes. “Although I work for a seed company, my conversations with salesman and farmers cover everything from disease issues, nutrient management, soil and tissue sampling, crop roots, and new hybrid options, to management choices, insurance, economics, and marketing options.”

Adding to his repertoire of educational tools, Steinacher hosts AgriGold’s *Yield Masters* podcast to guide 100% agronomy-focused conversations. Reaching far beyond his Illinois territory, Steinacher invites a wide range of guests—industry experts, researchers, extension specialists, and farmers to share their stories. “Our goal for the podcast is to have good agronomic conversations that give growers actionable information.”

Steinacher’s work doesn’t end with AgriGold programs. He partners with the Illinois Soybean Association to write blogs and lines up webinar speakers who share insights to current challenges. He also is serving on the Illinois CCA board for the third year.

CCAs Prepare Farmers Here and Abroad

“The CCA program is designed so that CCAs are in a position to help farmers be prepared. CCAs advise growers, to do that—we must stay up to date on the latest advancement and new technology. You have to be on your ‘A’ game, continually learning.” Being a CCA will not help you sell more products, Steinacher says, but the program provides ongoing education and networking opportunities that will benefit your career and enrich your life.

In 2018, Illinois Rotary Club offered Steinacher a life-changing opportunity, the chance to bring his passion for agronomy education to Zambia, Africa. “These villagers try to

raise enough corn to feed their families on an acre of land. Our mission was to help them increase production, so they could better provide for their family," Steinacher says. "Education is the only answer that delivers a lasting impact and enables them to advance themselves, their families, and their neighbors." Steinacher approached this situation the same way he tackles his customer's challenges—understand the problem then work backward toward the solution.

"The task was to appreciate the villagers' unique set of challenges and help them grasp basic agronomic concepts that would bring positive results." The group developed an agronomy training program and picture book to help them understand root development, nutrition, plant health, and photosynthesis.

Beginning with 11 farmers on the first trip, the group laid the foundation for continued work. The second trip in spring of 2019 had more than 100 farmers walking miles to participate in field training. The experience was life altering for both the villagers and Steinacher. "I cringe now when I see rain washing soil into a ditch. I personally know farmers who would give a lot to have our soil. I returned home with an increased appreciation for our soils, rich in organic matter, that enable us to grow more than we need."

Building Relationships

To fulfill the role as trusted advisers, Steinacher believes CCAs need to bridge the gap between the knowledge and practices that growers employ and the experiences and understanding that CCAs possess along with latest technology available. He believes that bridge can be built if CCAs constantly add to their knowledge and experiences that enable them to trust their gut, continually develop their reputation and credibility, and approach relationships with passion and sincerity.

Receiving the CCA of the Year award was very humbling for Steinacher, who describes himself as a “small-town guy from rural Illinois.” While that may be true, this country boy approaches everything he does with passion and sincerity that influences and encourages others. “To receive national and international recognition of the ICCA award is beyond humbling,” Steinacher says.

Like those who came before him and his mentors, Brown and Bauman, Steinacher hopes he too can be a ripple in the pond, using his passion for agronomy and education to assist growers and inspire others.

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