



Merrill "Dutch" and Irma Cragun, owners of Cragun's Resort, shared a laugh a few moments after learning Dutch Cragun was awarded the Outstanding Individual in Tourism Award during the Explore Minnesota Tourism conference at Cragun's resort Tuesday night. The award came as a surprise.

Brainerd Dispatch/Kelly Humphrey

Dutch Cragun honored with Top Tourism Industry Award

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EAST GULL LAKE —

A man who began his resort career at age 9 in charge of worms and minnows was recognized by the state Tuesday for his contribution to the tourism industry.

Merrill "Dutch" Cragun was presented with the Outstanding Individual in Tourism Award.

The award, the last of the night, came as a surprise announcement at the state's annual Explore Minnesota Tourism Conference at Cragun's Resort in East Gull Lake near Brainerd.

Cragun gave up tickets to a University of Minnesota-Northwestern basketball game to attend the award benefit only after the state tourism director told him it wouldn't fair for the host to leave.

"It's a total surprise," Cragun said. His wife, Irma, poked his shoulder as the award recipient was being described. "That's you," she told him.

Cragun credited Irma's work with the resort. "This award really,

truthfully goes to her."

The award is presented to someone who has most contributed to the state's \$11 billion travel and tourism industry by actively working to advance and promote tourism in Minnesota.

"I think it's a well-deserved award," Irma Cragun said of her husband.

John Edman, state tourism director, said Cragun's name is known throughout the state. In choosing the award, special consideration is given to the level of achievements over a lifetime and overall contributions to the state's image or tourism industry.

"He puts his heart and soul into this industry," Edman said before the award was announced, adding it was time Cragun received the award. Considerable effort went into keeping the award winner's name secret until the presentation.

Edman said the award is presented to someone who thinks beyond their individual property to consider the overall health of the

industry. The award dates back more than four decades. The goal is to recognize someone who has made that industry a passion.

Edman began his remarks noting Cragun's father was a pioneer in the industry, building six cabins on Gull Lake's Pine Beach in 1940.

Dutch Cragun graduated from the University of Minnesota and served in the Army during the Korean War. He took over the family resort business in 1957 and presided over its development with his wife, Irma. The resort now has 61 cabins, a 185-room hotel, conference and meeting facilities and employs 300 people in the summer and 160 during the winter.

Edman said Cragun's is Minnesota's largest four-season golf resort and conference center, but it's still run like a family business. Edman noted the Craguns' community involvement and work on industry councils and associations.

"He's been making friends and memories since 1940," Edman said. "And each of the three million guests

who have stayed with him feel like a welcome friend."

The tourism conference, with speakers and sessions on Tuesday and Wednesday, attracted about 300 people from a broad mix of industry elements from resorts to museums.

The focus this year was on ways tourism businesses may succeed in what is being termed the "new normal" of today's altered economy" and changed spending patterns from consumers.

Tourism is a key sector of the state's economy. The leisure and hospitality industry employs more than 244,000 Minnesotans.

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