

Agronomic Science Foundation

Norman E. Borlaug—Culmination of Determination

"It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope."

—Robert Francis Kennedy



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now a trained scientist with a doctorate in plant diseases with razor-sharp instincts for how plants grow and knew he could make an impact. It certainly wasn't easy but the untold hours hunched over in the blazing Mexican sun certainly paid off. In 20 years time, leading a team of young

From his humble beginnings—one of our most famous members was born on an Iowa farm in 1914 and attended a one-room school house—Norman E. Borlaug sent out those tiny ripples of hope to a hungry world. He was destined to become a crop scientist even at an early age as he often wondered why grass was greener in certain places on the farm as opposed to others. At a time when most farm boys dropped out of school, Borlaug went to college at the urging of his grandfather who regretted his own lack of education. Unfortunately, his childhood education had not prepared him, and he failed the entrance exam at the University of Minnesota.

Luckily, his "never give up" attitude finally got him accepted to the same university where a building is now named in his honor. He originally studied forestry but quickly became the protégé of Elvin C. Stakman, another legendary expert in plant diseases, who persuaded him to switch to plant pathology. Stakman later altered Borlaug's life path by urging him to join the Rockefeller Foundation's Mexican hunger project in 1944.

Reacting with near despair upon seeing the situation in Mexico and recalling images where people were on the verge of starvation in the depths of The Great Depression, Borlaug was determined to do something to help. He was

Mexican scientists and technicians, they created and distributed more than 75 new varieties of wheat, which eventually led to the four that comprise the bulk of the wheat grown today in Mexico, much of the Middle East, and Latin America. His breeding of high-yielding crops helped avert the mass famines in Africa, China, and India that were widely predicted during the 1960s.

Borlaug has been described as the father of the Green Revolution but was always disinclined to accept the title and called it "a miserable term" with his characteristic humility. In fact, when he found out that he had won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970, Dr. Borlaug was at work in a wheat field outside Mexico City. He was unable to be reached directly, so his wife, Margaret, took the call and then traveled 30 miles over rough and muddy roads to get to the wheat plot where he was working. When she drove up to tell him the news, he replied, "Someone's pulling your leg," and kept on working, mentioning that he would celebrate later.

On the day Borlaug Hall was dedicated, Norm reflected on E.C. Stakman's influence on his life. "Stak had a reputation for instilling commitment. That man lit the skies for me. He made me reach for things I thought were beyond my grasp."

I know some other young scientists who continue to reach for the stars today, and they are called Golden Opportunity Scholars. One alumnus was featured in last month's column, and I am planning to nominate him for the Norman Borlaug Award for Field Research and Application presented by the World Food Prize. This award recognizes exceptional, science-based achievement in international agriculture and food production by an individual under 40 who has clearly demonstrated intellectual courage, stamina, and determination in the fight to eliminate global hunger and poverty. I believe our very own Seth Sherry personifies this award and I hope the official award jury will agree. Stay tuned!

Addie Hall (center), a Golden Opportunity Scholar, talks with Norman Borlaug at the 2007 ASA, CSSA, and SSSA International Annual Meetings in New Orleans, LA.

