

Friday | September 7, 2001  
The Dallas Morning News

## High Profile: Norman Borlaug

01/21/2001

By David Tarrant / The Dallas Morning News

Randy Eli Grothe / DMN **Dr. Norman Borlaug, still active at 86, has spent much of his life fighting world hunger. Winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970, he now teaches one semester each year at Texas A&M.**

COLLEGE STATION, Texas – He works out of a windowless office barely big enough for a desk and two chairs for visitors. Lining the walls are shelves filled with books on agriculture and philosophy, a few framed photographs taken in Africa and Mexico, and a large poster of the University of Minnesota's wrestling team schedule.

It is an appropriately modest place to find the man who is among the lesser known of the Americans who have won the Nobel Peace Prize. The group includes such notables as former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, author and humanitarian Elie Wiesel and Martin Luther King Jr.

However, no one familiar with Dr. Norman Borlaug doubts his right to be on the same stage as the others. He is credited with starting the Green Revolution in the mid-1960s and saving millions of lives from starvation.

Since 1984, he has been a professor of international agriculture at Texas A&M, where he teaches one semester every year. But he is by no means semi-retired. At 86, he remains as active as ever – carrying his brand of prairie pragmatism to fight hunger around the world and in the classroom.

Think big. Fight complacency. That is the essence of his message, whether he's talking to heads of state or college freshmen.

"I think there are a lot of potential leaders who never become leaders because they don't put out that extra effort to move into unexplored territory," he says. "It's pretty boggy ground out there on the front lots of times. But the difference is courage. I think there is a lot of innate talent that's not utilized to anything approaching its real potential."

He gets calls, letters or e-mails every day from journalists, scientists, political leaders, farmers and friends all over the world. He is often called upon to lend his perspective to the emotional debate over the uses of biotechnology.

"Dr. Borlaug is held in the highest esteem worldwide, but particularly in the developing world. The scientific community, particularly the agricultural community, almost treat him as a deity," says Ed Runge, the Texas A&M professor who was responsible for bringing Dr. Borlaug to the university 16 years ago.

Dr. Borlaug's "excellent health" and "tremendous stamina" enable him to maintain a schedule that would tire many half his age, and he shows no sign of easing up, Dr. Runge says.

"Dr. Borlaug wants to die with his boots on."

### **The face of hunger**

On a chilly morning in December, he hardly looks like a warrior or controversial figure. He wears a gray pinstripe

suit. His tie clasp is shaped like a stalk of wheat. His hair is white and his voice a little shaky. But his handshake is firm and strong, befitting a man who is in the Hall of Fame for wrestling at the University of Minnesota.

It was at his alma mater where he first saw the face of hunger. He had grown up just outside Cresco, Iowa, a speck of a town a few miles south of Minnesota. He was shocked by what he saw when he arrived in Minneapolis as a freshman in the fall of 1933.

"I saw these people out there on the streets in the cold, mostly grown men and whole families too, sleeping on newspapers, hands out, asking for a nickel, begging for food. This was before the soup lines."

The sight of farm failures, sheriff's sales and hungry children would stay with him and influence his choices for the rest of his life. "I saw all that unfold. And I think that had something to do with how things turned out."

He was born on March 25, 1914, the eldest of three children of parents of Norwegian descent. He worked on the family farm, planting crops and raising livestock. His first eight grades were spent in a one-room rural schoolhouse. He attributes getting off the family farm to his grandfather, Nels Borlaug, who strongly encouraged education. He loved sports and played baseball and wrestled in high school. His wrestling coach was a lasting influence, always encouraging him to "give 105 percent."

He went to the University of Minnesota, which had a wrestling team. He periodically dropped out of school to earn money to pay for his tuition and living expenses. One of those jobs was as a leader in the Civilian Conservation Corps, working with unemployed men on federal projects. He saw that many were malnourished.

He returned to graduate school at Minnesota and studied plant pathology, receiving his doctorate in 1942. During the war, he worked as a microbiologist for DuPont.

In 1944, he joined a new program funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, aimed at assisting poor farmers in Mexico.

He spent the next 16 years at the International Maize and Wheat Center outside Mexico City working to improve wheat-crop yields and train a generation of Mexican agriculture scientists. During that time, he developed new strains of disease-resistant wheat distinguished by their smaller stalks, higher yields and greater adaptability.

By 1960, he began looking for other sites where he could start programs similar to the Mexico project. He had opportunities to go back to the United States in private enterprise but turned his attention to other parts of the world dealing with chronic hunger and famine.

That led him to the region where he would have his greatest impact – India and Pakistan.

### **Famine and starvation**

It was the mid-1960s and the subcontinent was experiencing famine and widespread starvation – despite emergency shipments of millions of tons of grain from the United States. India and Pakistan were at war, and doomsayers were predicting that a catastrophe of unprecedented proportions was virtually unavoidable with the possibility of millions of lives being lost to starvation.

Dr. Borlaug wanted to immediately plant his new strains of wheat but was repeatedly thwarted by an entrenched bureaucracy as well as cultural traditions opposing new agricultural methods. Finally, the famine became so bad that the governments of Pakistan and India overrode the obstructionists.

Bureaucratic snafus were not limited to Asia. A shipment of more than 500 million high-yield wheat seeds from Mexico was stalled by customs agents and later by the National Guard when the Watts riots prevented the cargo from getting to the Los Angeles port.

Despite the war raging around them, Dr. Borlaug and what he calls his "tough group of hunger fighters" planted the first crop. Yields more than doubled, helping avert the immediate crisis.

Pakistan wheat production grew from 3.5 million tons in 1965 to more than 14 million tons by the early 1990s.

During the same period in India, average wheat yields grew from 11 million tons to 55 million.

Those bountiful harvests prompted the U.S. Agency for International Development to hail his achievement as a Green Revolution.

In 1970, Dr. Borlaug, who was working in Mexico, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Margaret Borlaug got the news about her husband's award from a reporter in Oslo, Norway. She drove out to a wheat field to find him. "He didn't believe it. He said, 'Are you sure?' He was very surprised," she says.

In his acceptance speech, Dr. Borlaug quoted Alfred Nobel, the creator of the Nobel prizes, as saying: "I would rather take care of the stomachs of the living than the glory of the departed in the form of monuments."

But Dr. Borlaug was ambivalent about the spotlight. The award brought more attention and funding for the cause of world hunger. But it also pulled him away from his work. "It was a disaster as far as I'm concerned. You get pushed into so many things. A lot of your energies are cut off from the things you know best. Some of them you have to do. Because you end up being the spokesman for science in general."

### **Biotechnology**

His latest fight pits him against "the doomsayers," as he calls them. These are critics who question the use of biotechnology and genetically altered crops, the tools he used to help reap the lifesaving harvests for millions in

Asia and Latin America.

He argues that biotechnology has actually helped conservation. Without high-yield crops and more efficient farming methods, the United States and other countries would have had to plow under millions of acres of woodlands – at a great cost to plants and wildlife.

"We wouldn't be talking about saving the spotted owl if we were plowing up that much more land," he says.

Dr. Borlaug says there is no such thing as a risk-free life. He knows this, because he and his wife had a son who was born with spina bifida. The boy died in childhood.

"Who was responsible for my son's condition?" he says. "Nobody. Maybe it was a bad gene. Maybe something went wrong right after conception. There are no zero biological risks and yet people keep searching.

"We have to find an acceptable level of risk. And that acceptable level will vary from one country or society to another, depending on the social-economic evolution of that country."

**Time for his children**

Dr. Borlaug is married to the former Margaret Gibson, whom he met in college. The Borlaugs keep a home in Dallas, so Mrs. Borlaug can live close to their two children, Jeanie Laube and William Borlaug. The Borlaugs also have five grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

Mrs. Borlaug, 89, says she doesn't travel anymore because of her arthritis. Dr. Borlaug spends only about a month at home each year. "He's never been home a lot. You just live with it."

But he always made time for his children, she says. When the family was living in Mexico, Dr. Borlaug organized a baseball team for his son. In the process, Dr. Borlaug helped introduce Little League baseball to Mexico.

He coached Billy through Little League, Pony League and Colt League. He also attended many of Jeanie's Girl Scout meetings. "He'd drive many a night getting back [from his field work] for his kids," Mrs. Borlaug says.

When he is not teaching at Texas A&M, Dr. Borlaug spends a great deal of time traveling in Mexico and Africa as part of his work. He is a consultant to the International Maize and Wheat Center in Mexico and president of the Sasakawa Africa Association, a private Japanese foundation working to raise the productivity of farmers in sub-Saharan Africa.

The latter "is a program that happened in a funny way," Dr. Borlaug says. In 1984, he got a call from Ryoichi Sasakawa, chairman of the Sasakawa Foundation of Japan, who has since passed away.

Mr. Sasakawa wanted to know if the Green Revolution's agricultural methods could be applied to Ethiopia, Sudan and other parts of Africa suffering from drought and famine.

"Why isn't something being done to change food production like what you did in India and Pakistan?" Dr. Sasakawa asked him.

"I don't know," Dr. Borlaug replied. "I'm retired now and too old to start something new."

The next morning Mr. Sasakawa called him back and said, "Young man, I'm 15 years older than you are. We should have started this project yesterday, but let's get started tomorrow."

And the work is not over yet. **Date and place of birth:** March 25, 1914, in Cresco, Iowa

**My heroes are:** E. Charles Stakman, professor and scientist at the University of Minnesota, George Harrar of the Rockefeller Foundation, my grandfather

**Favorite expression:** If you stretch yourself, you'll be surprised how much you can do. Get a little stardust on your hands, and you'll be surprised what that can do for you. And not only for you but also for your family, the state, the nation and the people of the world.

**Best asset:** I like to see action.

**Worst habit:** I don't know how to handle paperwork. Neglect of paper is my worst habit.

**Favorite city outside Dallas:** The lake region of southern Chile is a most beautiful place. I loved to fish there.

**Nobody knows:** I was certain I was going to be a second baseman for the Chicago Cubs.