Penn Jillette Interviews Dr. Norman Borlaug: The Man Who Fed the World

By ACSH Staff — August 14, 2006

Penn Jillette is not only a magician, comedian, skeptic, libertarian, and radio host -- he's also a big fan of ACSH Trustee Dr. Norman Borlaug, calling him "My biggest hero on the planet" in this recent interview of Borlaug on Penn's radio show:

http://podcast.penn.freefm.com/penn/25352.mp3

Penn and his partner, Teller, have praised Borlaug before, declaring him "the greatest man who ever lived" on their Showtime TV series and even taking the time to make a brief congratulations video for Borlaug during ACSH's twenty-fifth anniversary celebration in 2003.

As noted recently in our quarterly *ACSH in Action* newsletter, Borlaug isn't just an ACSH Trustee, a Nobel Peace Prize recipient, and, as the title of a new book about him by Dr. Leon Hesser puts it, *The Man Who Fed the World* [2]. He has also been inducted into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame, having made his way into the Big Ten semifinals back when he was a student at the University of Minnesota.

Most people know him, though, for his work as an agricultural scientist, dramatically boosting wheat yields by breeding disease- and weather-resistant varieties and ushering in the so-called "Green Revolution." Borlaug is credited with feeding a billion people around the world, starting in Mexico and soon moving on to Asia. It was for that work he was awarded the Nobel in 1970, and he continues to contribute to research on maize, sorghum, barley, and other crops.

At the age of ninety-two, he still travels the globe, combating starvation, promoting biotechnology, and warning against natural threats such as "wheat rust."

Borlaug has been praised in fiction, as in an episode of *West Wing*, and Penn concludes his interview by saying, "It seems like if you know one name of one person alive today, it maybe should be Norman Borlaug." Penn jokes that Borlaug's ongoing work is so important to saving lives that "Probably, doing this show, he's killing hundreds of people."

On a more serious note, Borlaug criticizes those activists who would stand in the way of agricultural progress, saying that oft-derided transgenic crops are the most important development in agriculture, offering, for instance, the hope that rice's resistance to a blight called "rust" can be transferred to wheat, preventing devastating (all-natural) crop failures and saving millions of people -- again.

I share Penn's awe at Dr. Borlaug -- not the first time I've found myself idolizing the same person as Penn, since his mentor as a magician-and-debunker-of-superstition was James "the Amazing" Randi, who was crucial in sparking my own skeptical, pro-science philosophical inclinations as a
teenager, leading me inexorably, two decades later, to ACSH, grateful to have met both Randi and Borlaug along the way (the former starting me in the right direction philosophically and the latter reassuring me that I'd arrived in the right place). The sci-fi writer Arthur C. Clarke famously said that any sufficiently advanced technology will seem like magic, and if there's a more impressive feat of magic than saving hundreds of millions with agricultural science, I have yet to hear of it. Listen to the Penn-Borlaug interview [1], and you'll sense that Penn, for all his prestidigitatious skills, feels the same way.

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