

Remembering Dr. Norman Borlaug

By ACSH Staff — September 13, 2009

Norman Borlaug, Nobel Laureate, Green Revolution pioneer, and a founding Director of the American Council on Science and Health in 1978, died this weekend, at age ninety-five.

Norman, by dramatically increasing the world's food supply, is credited with saving over one billion lives. His early work in Mexico on developing and cultivating high-yielding wheat, resistant to weather conditions and other external threats, turned that country from a wheat importer to a wheat exporter in just a few years. His agricultural expertise was soon spread around the world, most prominently in India and Pakistan, saved from starvation by Norman's "Green Revolution." Norman produced food so that people could live, not starve to death.

I first encountered Norman in the late 1970s when I contacted him to see if he would be willing to serve on the Board of the brand new organization I had founded -- the American Council on Science and Health. To my utter surprise, he wrote back and told me that he was already a fan of mine. Norman had purchased two dozen copies of my 1976 book *Panic in the Pantry: Food Fads, Facts, and Fallacies* (co-authored with Harvard's Dr. Fredrick J. Stare) -- and had distributed them to friends and colleagues. I was so flattered!

He agreed eagerly to join the Board of ACSH and was present as ACSH was announced at a National Press Club press conference in Washington, DC in 1978. He was committed to ACSH's goal of promoting sound science -- particularly as it related to the use of modern agricultural technology to feed the world.

Dr. Norman Borlaug has to be the most significant human being born in the twentieth century -- but so few people have even heard of him. He awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in 1970 (the Nobel team called about 6am, but Norman was already in the field, his hands in the soil -- his wife had to drive in the dark to find him to tell him the news, which he did not believe). He was also awarded a Presidential Medal of Freedom and Congressional Gold Medal. Few people have received all three of these honors.

Dr. Borlaug was recognized in other ways as well. [A segment of the TV series *West Wing* made pointed references to his work in feeding the world.](#) ^[1] ACSH staff held a reception at my apartment in New York City shortly after this segment aired -- and we had the pleasure of showing Norman this segment, which we had on tape.

Yet he was so humble and down to earth. He would regularly call me at ACSH and tell me what a great job I was doing to defend sound science. Each of these calls inevitably reduced me to tears. Dr. Borlaug was telling *me* that I was doing a good job?! Almost two years ago -- on the day of his ninety-fourth birthday -- he called to say he was in town and asked if he could come over. We dashed to the bakery across the street to get a cake and candles -- and had a great celebration in

our conference room as Norman lectured us on the looming dangers of wheat rust.

Shortly after that, Norman suffered a health crisis -- a form of leukemia -- and we kept constant touch. He became very weak and could not eat. But suddenly he rebounded and felt so much better.

Six months ago, Dr. Gilbert Ross and I flew to Dallas to attend Norman's gala ninety-fifth birthday celebration -- and he looked great! He gave a riveting presentation about the value of biotechnology in modern food production -- and was there to cut his huge and delicious birthday cake (the centerpiece at each table was a bouquet of wheat stalks).

I kept in touch with Norman weekly -- he was dedicated to ACSH and its mission and very upset that ACSH was facing severe financial woes. When I last spoke with him ten days ago, he had just returned from a physician's check up, and said the doctor proclaimed, "Dr. Borlaug, you are going to make it!!" When Norman asked him what that meant, the doctor explained that he thought that Norman would make it to age 100.

Norman, we miss you so much already. You were an inspiration to ACSH -- and all those who pursue sound science for the betterment of mankind. We at ACSH are proud to have worked with such a pivotal figure and to have had him on our Board of Trustees. We only hope we will be able to carry forward the work of Dr. Norman Borlaug -- defending science and technology -- a small fraction as effectively as Norman himself did.

Dr. Elizabeth Whelan is president of the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH.org [2]).

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Links

[1] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7qcTVWm_oU

[2] <http://ACSH.org>