

**Judith Rodin, President of the Rockefeller Foundation
Tribute to Norman Borlaug
University of Minnesota
Thursday, October 8, 2009**

I'm honored to share a word about Norman Borlaug, our distinguished Rockefeller Foundation colleague of almost four decades. As some of you experienced firsthand, Norm was a whirlwind of creative energy and initiative. Yet, even after kings and presidents suspended prizes of peace and medals of freedom and scientific excellence around his slender neck, he somehow maintained humility and anonymity. The modesty Norm kept. But after Aaron Sorkin wrote Norm into an episode of *The West Wing* – “There are people in the world who make miracles,” one character professed of Norm – his name became part of the zeitgeist.

Among the 20th century's landmark achievements – a vaccine for yellow fever and map of the human genome, a voyage to the moon and dawn of the computer age – none saved greater numbers of lives than Norm's. But while he became an icon, he began, first and foremost, as a scientist. He recognized that, over time, it's the method that moves the mountain.

As an agronomist, Norm hypothesized, experimented, and changed his approach when necessary, time and again. When he couldn't quite cross-breed the right cereals, he kept manipulating tiny wheat blossoms – often in the blazing Mexican sun – until he discovered the strain of dwarf wheat that would increase India's output almost sixfold.

As an innovator, Norm refused to be confined by even the turning of seasons. Perhaps his most crucial breakthrough was “shuttle breeding”: planting in two fields, on opposite calendars, and literally “shuttling” seeds from one place to another. Mexico, as it happened, freely enabled this variety of workaholic. Every summer, Norm and his team planted test pilots at Chapingo in the Central Highlands. Every fall, they quickly reaped the most promising seeds and trekked 700 miles north to the Sonora desert's Yaqui Valley for a winter planting and spring harvest. They analyzed data at night. They wrote reports on weekends. They persevered through both hell and high water – working through illness and fording flooded rivers on their south-north and north-south journeys. Then, they repeated the whole process all over again. Nobody – well, almost nobody – wanted to work for Norm.

One particular year, Norm was in a remote region of Sonora and fell a little behind in his bureaucratic upkeep. A Rockefeller Foundation administrator sent him an old-fashioned, tersely-phrased, telex communication. “Expense reports three months overdue,” it said. “Please submit immediately.” Norm wasn't wont to read these things or much else unrelated to his mission. In fact, when he learned he won the Nobel Peace Prize, he fretted about leaving his fields for Oslo. But eventually, probably late in the evening, Norm got around to glancing at the note. Without pause, he drafted a reply: “Do you want wheat or do you want paper?”

Fortunately, my Rockefeller Foundation predecessors exercised the good judgment to choose wheat. And Norm's shuttle breeding technique not only cut in half the time required to produce new crop varieties, but also rendered strains that were insensitive to the day's length and thus able to grow in a wider range of latitudes, including those of south Asia.

I was sometimes privileged, during the final years of Norm's life, to be with him as he received honors and aggressively lobbied – around the world – on behalf of the cause he spent his life championing: hunger's eradication.

Reflecting on our time together, I've come to appreciate his most important contribution. It's not measured merely in seeds bred, though he and his cohort created wheat, rice, and other crop varieties that now feed more than half the world's families. It's not calculated only by numbers of lives saved, though his work saved a billion and counting. It's not assessed solely by the strife he thwarted, though during the late 1960s, as Pakistan and India moved toward self-sufficient agricultural production, one United States government official noted that Norm helped diffuse – in his words – a “red, bloody revolution” by sowing a “green revolution” instead.

Norm's most important legacy is the “how” not the “what.” This man of extraordinary humility tilted practices of inquiry and discovery toward solving humanity's most pressing challenges. He showed us that there is no natural limit on ingenuity and learning if married with heavy lifting. He spoke truth to power – in forums both admiring and adversarial – pushing prime ministers and presidents to keep the revolution alive by taking responsibility for their peoples' futures.

We will miss his wisdom, mentorship, and example. We will miss his constancy and counsel. But Norm's commitments carry on. They carry on through our ways of working. They carry on through our ways of seeing, questioning, and understanding. And they carry on through our innovations and efforts to better the lives of the world's billion still hungry people. We are very much in his debt.

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