

# CELEBRATING THE LIFE OF NORMAN BORLAUG

By Kenneth Quinn

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There is no greeting card for National Ag Day. But there should be.

This year, the celebration in the United States will fall on March 25. But given that such a small percentage of people these days are in any way connected to farming or food production, the date highlighting our food system – a critical part of every person's life – will go largely unnoticed.

To be sure, America's capital city, Washington, D.C., will be inundated with FFA students in their ubiquitous blue jackets; 4-H members; Farm Bureau delegations; and representatives of corn growers, hog producers and soybean groups all crisscrossing the city and visiting Congressional representatives on Capitol Hill. National Ag Day is an annual ritual well-known to those who participate, but it doesn't garner much attention from anyone else. But it should.

Washington, D.C., is at its best in late March. The snow is gone, the weather has warmed, and the cherry blossoms are beginning to appear. Families and students on spring break will flood the city, visiting all of the grand monuments that tell the story of America's triumphs, military victories and great achievements.

But, look as they might, all of those visitors to Washington, D.C., from America's agricultural sector and the thousands of graduates of our Land-Grant Universities will find no monument to one of America's greatest achievements and the economic foundation upon which our country was built—farming.

On March 25 this year, that will change. While small in size compared to other grand monuments, in terms of its location and meaning it will rise to the same level of prominence.

For March 25 is by serendipitous coincidence the 100th anniversary of the birth of the great agricultural scientist and humanitarian Norman Borlaug, and it will be the day that his statue is unveiled in the U.S. Capitol's Statuary Hall, to stand for all time.

Since many of those reading this article may never have heard of Borlaug or be familiar with his achievements, allow me to give you a crash course in "Borlaug 101."

Born in Iowa in 1914, Norm, as he wanted everyone to call him, was a high school and college wrestler who earned his PhD in plant pathology at the University of Minnesota. In the 1940s, he went to Mexico where he spent the next two decades toiling in remote fields with farmers to develop "miracle wheat" that could triple yields and was disease resistant. Borlaug then took his new seeds to India and Pakistan in the 1960s and convinced the leaders of both countries to adapt his approach to agriculture to save hundreds of

millions from famine, starvation and death. He became known as the “Father of the Green Revolution.”

In 1970, Norm received the Nobel Peace Prize for “providing bread to a hungry world.” He is one of only three Americans in history to also receive the Congressional Gold Medal and Presidential Medal of Freedom – America’s highest civilian honors; the other two are the well-known Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Elie Wiesel.

Norm spent the rest of his life endeavoring to take the benefits of his innovations to Africa and other places where hunger persisted in the world. He founded The World Food Prize in 1986 to recognize and inspire the breakthrough achievements necessary to erode hunger and supply nutritious food for all. The 39 winners of our \$250,000 award – the World Food Prize Laureates – come from around the globe and have led the single greatest period of food production and hunger reduction in human history, over the past century.

When Norm was born in 1914, there were approximately 1.7 billion people on the planet. When he died in 2009, that figure was approaching 7 billion. By 2050, it is estimated our global population will swell to 9 billion. We must find a way to feed them all, and that is what I have come to describe as “The Greatest Challenge in Human History.”

In his valedictory speech at the World Food Prize symposium in Des Moines, Norm described the challenge we face in this way: If you could take all of the grain produced by human beings in the last 11,000 years and place it all in

one huge pile, that is how much grain that must be produced in the next 50 years in order to ensure adequate food for all.

Such dramatically increased crop production would be extremely difficult given the relatively stable weather conditions that prevailed during the period when Norman Borlaug was alive. However, this enormous challenge of food production is now exacerbated by climate volatility and water shortages plaguing agriculture in parts of the United States and around the globe.

The debate over the planting of genetically modified crops is forever altered by these devastating climatic and environmental variations. Are we to leave those smallholder farmers in poor countries vulnerable to these problems by halting or restricting research by modern plant scientists? Norman Borlaug would not hesitate to answer by giving his emphatic and complete support to the widespread utilization of biotechnology. He believed that science was the leading element if we are to once again prevail in preventing famine and starvation. He would be extremely proud that his home state of Iowa is at the forefront of bioscience innovation.

Each state gets to place two statues of its greatest heroes in the U.S. Capitol. The bipartisan leadership of the Iowa State Legislature voted unanimously, and Governor Terry Branstad endorsed, bringing one of our Civil War leaders home and replacing it with the statue of Norman Borlaug, that farm boy from Howard County of whom it is said “he saved more lives than any other person who has ever lived.”

Norm's statue may seem somewhat out of place among many of the other statues in the Capitol, which portray political leaders and governing officials, generally outfitted in their finery and fancy coats. Norm has been depicted by sculptor Benjamin Victor, standing in a wheat field in his wrinkled work clothes, to illustrate the dedication and persistence that shows his true character and those traits which are needed to inspire the next generation to tackle global hunger and feed the world.

To remind all Americans of the critical challenge before us in fighting food insecurity and in feeding the world, we should make March 25 – Norman Borlaug's birthday – our National Ag Day every year. And maybe, we should even create a greeting card.

