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Fall 2011

Borlaug Fellowship Opens Doors for Rachel Opole [Student Accolades]

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Peter, Mary Lou, "Borlaug Fellowship Opens Doors for Rachel Opole [Student Accolades]" (2011). *INTSORMIL Impacts and Bulletins*. 23.

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Student Accolades



Borlaug Fellowship Opens Doors for Rachel Opole

Rachel Opole grew up in Nairobi, Kenya's capitol, and the K-State doctoral student developed an early interest in livestock and crop production. Those interests, largely influenced by her parents, inspired her desire to improve crops grown to feed people. To enhance her work in that area, Opole earned the Norman E. Borlaug Leadership Enhancement in Agriculture Program (LEAP) fellowship, administered by the University of California–Davis.

The Norman Borlaug Institute for International Agriculture, based at Texas A&M University, carries on the work of Dr. Norman Borlaug, an agricultural scientist who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970 for his work in food production and hunger alleviation.

Vara Prasad, associate professor of agronomy, advises Opole. He also was an adviser to four of the 11 Borlaug fellows who have come to K-State since 2008.

Opole's research focuses on how finger millet, a plant widely used as a cereal crop in arid areas of Africa and Asia, adapts to environmental stresses such as high temperatures and drought. As part of the one-year fellowship, she will return to Kenya to study for three months, then to India for another three months. In Kenya, Opole will replicate the research she's done in Kansas, and in India she will analyze different types of finger millet. She will return to Kansas for the final six months of the fellowship.

"The idea is to evaluate the different varieties and find those that have the most resistance to environmental stresses," said 50-year-old Opole, who has been working toward her doctorate since 2008.

There is an interesting twist to Opole's story. She earned a bachelor's degree, then entered the workforce, then completed a master's degree, and again returned to work before coming to Kansas to pursue her doctorate — all while raising five children who currently live in Kenya with her husband, Philip Oduor.

Once she's completed the fellowship and her doctoral degree in agronomy, Opole plans to return to Kenya to work toward improving food production.

—Mary Lou Peter