Borlaug Fellowship Opens Doors for Rachel Opole [Student Accolades]

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Student Accolades

Borlaug Fellowship Opens Doors for Rachel Opole

Rachel Opole grew up in Nairobi, Kenya’s capital, 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

Students Win International Case Study Competition

A team of students from the Department of Agricultural Economics earned first place in the International Food and Agribusiness Management Association’s case study competition in Frankfurt, Germany, in June.

Graduate students Brady Brewer, David Boussios, Cooper Morris, Jessica Johnson, and Jaeljattin Jean were given four hours to analyze a business case and craft an executive summary of the problem and their proposed solution. The team presented their analysis and answered questions during two rounds of judging.

The case study focused on Grameen Danone Foods, a Bangladesh dairy marketing yogurt. The company is a joint venture between a bank and a popular yogurt brand sold in the United States.

“The problem was that this joint venture wanted to meet a sales target and net income goal, yet they also wanted to be a social company,” Brewer said. “Our solution not only had to provide value to the parent company, but also to the poverty-stricken areas in Bangladesh.

“We focused on the sales goal, tightening the supply chain and distribution system, and increasing the per-cow productivity of the small farmers.”

The University of California–Santa Clara placed second and InHolland University took third.

“The solutions were very diverse from each of the teams,” Brewer said. “While we implemented extension programs, InHolland focused on providing useful capital to the farmers in the form of solar cars, while California–Santa Clara focused on the financial ratios and performance aspects.”

The team received support in the form of sponsorships from the following: CHS Inc., Koch Industries, Cargill, K-State Department of Agricultural Economics, and K-State Graduate Student Council.

—Shannon Krueger