The E.T. & Vam York Distinguished ASA Lectureship needs no other tribute than the list of leaders who have received the honor of giving the lecture over the last 12 years. Since it was established in 2002, in recognition of the importance of agronomic science and Dr. York’s contributions to research, education, and administration in the field, the list of names reads like a who’s who in the world of sustainable agriculture and those disciplines that support that effort. Even those who are not members of ASA will recognize the most famous of those lecturers—Dr. Norman Borlaug, who is well known to us as the “father of the green revolution.”

Changing the Face of Agriculture in Africa

Others might also recognize the person who changed the face of agriculture in Africa—Dr. Gebisa Ejeta, geneticist and professor at Purdue University who was the York Lecturer in 2009. Throughout his career, Dr. Ejeta has consistently worked to foster economic development and empower subsistence farmers through the creation of agricultural enterprises in rural Africa. Selected as a World Food Prize recipient that same year for his research leading to improved sorghum varieties in his native Ethiopia and other African nations, Ejeta has dedicated his career to fighting hunger. Sorghum is a major food crop for more than 500 million people on the African continent, and although it may not yet be appealing to the American palate or grain processors, it may one day prove to be important as a feed crop in the United States because of increasing drought conditions.

Working in Sudan during the early 1980s, Dr. Ejeta developed Africa’s first commercial hybrid variety of sorghum tolerant to drought. Later, he and a Purdue University colleague in Indiana discovered the chemical basis of the relationship between the deadly parasitic weed Striga and sorghum. Their breakthrough led to the development of sorghum varieties resistant to both drought and the parasitic weed.

Basically, complicit in its own destruction, sorghum assists Striga to grow and thrive. The biological association between Striga and its host plants—of which sorghum is just one—can be catastrophic.

Left: Dr. Gebisa Ejeta at the 2009 Annual Meeting. Below: Dr. Norman Borlaug at the 2007 Annual Meeting.