Not Your Typical Spring Break
Eight Oklahoma State Students Visit Home of Borlaug’s Research

by Susan Fisk, director of public and science communications

When ASA and SSSA Fellow Bill Raun offered eight Oklahoma State students an opportunity to travel to CIMMYT in Cuidad Obregón, Sonora, Mexico, they were told it would be a cultural experience. After visiting the home of Norman Borlaug’s research, they would view agriculture differently and would have a new perspective on life.

Gwen Wehmeyer, a graduate student in Raun’s lab, heartily agrees. “I would not change a thing…not one,” Wehmeyer says.

Wehmeyer was one of five American students (joined by Katie McCauley, Melissa Golden, Andi Nichols, and Ethan Driver), who traveled with three international students (Eva Nambi, Uganda; Jagman Dhillon, India; and Bruno Moran-din Figueiredo, Brazil) to CIMMYT from 12–18 Mar. 2016.

Cuidad Obregón is known for its dry and hot conditions as it is located right in the heart of the desert. Borlaug was one of the founders of this research station, the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center, in the 1950s as the wheat specialist. It officially became CIMMYT in 1966. Students not only met with researchers, but also farmers and co-op business owners across the area. They took tours of local farms. And they got to meet one of Borlaug’s children, Jeanie Borlaug Laube.

McCauley shared, “Being from Oklahoma, seeing endless fields of wheat was nothing new. However, irrigated wheat is something that I rarely see. Wheat in the Yaqui Valley (Mexico) is grown on beds—three per bed—and furrow irrigated. Their production practices result in some of the highest yields the world has seen in wheat production.”

Wehmeyer was astonished that the farmers use ammonia as their nitrogen source. “While irrigating, they bubble straight ammonia into the water for fertilization. Not only are the farmers only getting about 25% of the nitrogen they apply (due to volatilization), but it is also not regulated when they drain the field. It then releases all of the chemicals into the ground in the area. The United States is so fortunate to have the chemical regulations that we do. It is a practice that many farmers potentially take for granted.”

doi:10.2134/csa2016-61-6-12