Science Societies

Longtime USDA plant physiologist leaves estate to Agronomic Science Foundation

By Joy Drohan

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The Agronomic Science Foundation financially supports programs like the Golden Opportunity Scholars Intitute, which fosters the development of undergraduates in our sciences (top left). The foundation also supports awards like the Gerald O. Mott Meritorious Graduate Student Award in Crop Science, which Bishwoyog Bhattarai (top right) received

earlier this year, as well as lectureships like the Betty Klepper Endowed Lectureship (bottom right).

Dr. Sarah Lingle, a USDA-ARS research plant physiologist for 27 years, passed away on 17 Apr. 2020 and left much of her estate to the Agronomic Science Foundation (ASF). “When I heard about her gift, it didn’t surprise me, given her commitment to science and the public good,” says Stephen Kresovich, Coker Trustees Chair of Genetics at Clemson University, and a member of ASA and CSSA. He worked with Lingle early in her career. “Some people leave money and make a big deal about it. But Sarah was unassuming and selfless and didn’t expect plaudits.”

“Each year the Agronomic Science Foundation makes tremendous impacts in the lives of students, researchers, and practitioners in the Societies through the financial support of awards, lectureships, and service initiatives,” says Dr. Seth Murray, chair of the ASF board. “I like to believe that our ASF goals are consistent with the wonderful career Dr. Lingle had and support the scientific community she valued.”

Dr. Lingle’s gift is the single largest made to ASF over its 50+ year history, adding nearly 20% to its portfolio. Her unrestricted gift, to be housed in the priority fund, will be used to support priority activities, projects, and programs identified by the ASF board.

“This gift comes just as the Societies have identified critical needs to broaden diversity, equity, and inclusion, while increasing membership,” Murray says. “Dr. Lingle’s gift will certainly have a huge impact on achieving these and other strategic goals. We hope to use these funds to honor her generosity and her scientific legacy.”

Selfless Desire to Make the World Better

It seems that Lingle would have appreciated these goals. She began her career with USDA in 1984 as perhaps the only woman scientist at the USDA-ARS Weslaco lab in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. Kresovich says, “I can’t remember any other female scientists in her group.” Lingle just kept her head down and focused on her work.



Sarah Lingle

Her family, colleagues, and friends repeatedly mention that she and her late husband, Thomas Pratt Washington, had a selfless desire to leave the world a better place and to quietly work through challenges in search of answers that would help others.

“Sarah loved science and the career she had,” says Aubrey Washington, her brother-in-law. “So I can only assume that she saw her gift to the ASF as a way to encourage the work she loved.”

Lingle was born on 22 July 1955, to John and Dorothy Lingle in Davis, CA. Her childhood was spent in Modesto, CA.

She graduated from the University of California at Davis in 1977 with a bachelor’s degree in Genetics. She went on to the University of Nebraska–Lincoln to earn a master’s degree with Dr. Jim Specht in 1978. After that, she pursued a Ph.D. in Agronomy at Washington State University. With Dr. Peggy Chevalier, Lingle studied sugar metabolism in developing wheat and barley kernels. This would form the

foundation of her career's work on sugar metabolism, mainly in sugarcane and sweet sorghum.

Next came a postdoctoral position at the USDA lab in Fargo, ND, where she studied 2,4-D translocation in leafy spurge, a persistent weed common in pasture, with Dr. Jeffrey Suttle.

In 1984, Lingle took a job as a plant physiologist with USDA-ARS in Weslaco, TX. She worked on the physiology of enzymes in sugarcane and sweet sorghum to enhance crop quality to benefit growers. She studied how sugarcane and sweet sorghum accumulate sugar in the stem and ways to increase it, so it could be crystalized more efficiently for commercial use.

She authored or coauthored at least 60 publications in Weslaco and in Houma, LA, where she and Tom moved to in 1999 for Lingle's work at the USDA Sugarcane Research Lab.

Generosity, Dedication to Science an Inspiration

"For more than two decades at ARS, we witnessed Dr. Sarah Lingle's steadfast scientific work," says USDA-ARS Administrator Dr. Chavonda Jacobs-Young. "Her professional legacy to the science community through her exemplary work, as well as her generosity and commitment, will always be an inspiration to all of us."

In about 2005, Lingle developed multiple myeloma, a cancer of the blood. Tom died suddenly in 2008. Lingle retired in 2011 and moved to Salem, OR.

Throughout life, Lingle was a devout Episcopalian. She sang with the choir of each church she belonged to and volunteered in the church office in retirement. She loved to read and was writing her first novel. She enjoyed watching and feeding the birds,

gardening, and spending time with her cat, Sassy.

Travel was also a passion in Lingle's life. She and Tom traveled extensively, both internationally and on day trips to explore hidden gems of their local area. Lingle and a cousin became "travel buddies" late in life. They went to Belgium, Paris, Venice, Istanbul, and the Canadian Rockies.

Through years of remission and relapse and complications from multiple myeloma, Lingle maintained grit and good cheer, determined not to be stopped from doing what she wanted to do.

Lingle's lifelong dedication to science is displayed even in her passing through her generous gift to ASF, which the foundation will use to advance crop and soil science and the careers of other women and underrepresented scientists.

For more information on how ASF supports ASA, CSSA, and SSSA through its scholarships, lectureships, awards, and other programs, visit **www.a-s-f.org**.

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