



Plays With Dirt, Feeds the World

Pedro A. Sanchez '62, Upper Grandview, New York

If things had gone as planned, Pedro A. Sanchez would be running his father's fertilizer company in Havana and much more of the world's population would be starving. Instead the Cuban Revolution forced his family to flee in 1960 to the U.S., where Sanchez, the oldest of four children, was studying agronomy at Cornell University. As the family business was gone, Sanchez switched to plan B: to become an expert in tropical soils so he could fight world hunger. A seminar at Cornell had stunned him by revealing the potential for massive starvation in India. "That threat inspired me to choose this work," he says. He had no inkling that he'd one day be honored globally as one of the most prominent people in his field.

In 1968 Sanchez went to Peru and helped the country achieve self-sufficiency in rice in just three years. Later he helped Brazilian scientists use 70 million acres of land in the Cerrado region, long assumed useless, and now their soybean production equals that of the U.S.

After 50, Sanchez began his work in Africa, where he has helped millions of farmers boost their crop yields by planting trees that add nitrogen to the soil. "I love to play with dirt," he says. Asked if he gardens, he replies: "My garden is a village in western Kenya called Sauri, where they made me an honorary tribal chief, telling me that the trees had restored the villagers' dignity because now they could feed their families."

While Sanchez was held in great esteem by grateful farmers and his peer scientists, he achieved worldwide acclaim only after two recent events.

In 2003 he won the World Food Prize—often compared in importance to the Nobel Prize—for his lifelong achievements in reducing hunger. A year later he was awakened from a nap by a telephone call from the MacArthur Foundation telling him he was receiving one of its "genius grants" of \$500,000.

Now the director of the Tropical Agriculture Program at Columbia University's Earth Institute, Sanchez understands the changes and opportunities that have come with his recognition. "I've got notoriety now," he says. "People take me more seriously, and I can influence the cause of eliminating world hunger for good."

from *AARP Magazine*, November & December 2005
http://www.aarpmagazine.org/lifestyle/hitting_it_big.html