

# Dedication: Professor Wally Marasas

Walter Friedrich Otto Marasas was born on 25 October 1941 in Boksburg, South Africa. After obtaining his B.Sc. and M.Sc. from the University of Pretoria, he received a Ph.D. in Plant Pathology from the University of Wisconsin, USA, in 1969. Dr Marasas returned to South Africa with the Plant Protection Research Institute and, together with Dr Fanie Kellerman of the Onderstepoort Veterinary Research Institute, investigated equine leukoencephalomalacia, a disease that causes brain lesions in horses. Mouldy maize was a suspected cause, and Wally identified *Fusarium verticillioides* (then known as *F. moniliforme*) as the culprit. This launched a decades-long examination of this fungus and its impact on animal and human health.

Wally moved to the South African Medical Research Council (MRC) in 1975 and remained there until his retirement in 2006, when he was the Unit Director of the Programme on Mycotoxins and Experimental Carcinogenesis (PROMEC Unit). Throughout this period, he made major inroads into understanding the health effects of mycotoxins, based on his expertise in fungal taxonomy, specifically of *Fusarium* species and the toxic effects of their mycotoxins. Notably, he investigated the high incidences of oesophageal cancer in the former Transkei region of Eastern Cape Province, at first in relation to the occurrence of *F. verticillioides* and later in relation to fumonisins, which Wally's team characterized from *F. verticillioides* (strain MRC 826) brought back from



Photograph courtesy of South African Medical Research Council.

the Transkei. He published more than 300 scientific articles, and the Institute for Scientific Information in 2002 rated him as one of the most cited researchers worldwide in two categories.

Professor Marasas enjoyed wide international recognition and was admitted to membership of the prestigious National Academy of Sciences of the USA. Among his many awards were the Gold Medal from the South African Society for Plant Pathology, the Wellcome Gold Medal from Wellcome Pharmaceuticals, the African Academy of Sciences/CIBA Prize for Agricultural Biosciences, the MRC Silver Medal for Excellence, the MT Steyn Gold Medal from the

South African Academy for Science and Arts, and the distinguished service award from Kansas State University. Professor Marasas was only the second South African to be elected a Fellow of the American Phytopathological Society. He held several visiting academic positions, at Pennsylvania State University, USA; the University of Sydney, Australia; and Kansas State University, USA. He was also appointed as honorary professor at the University of the Orange Free State and as

extraordinary professor at the University of Pretoria, South Africa.

Aside from his own academic achievements, Wally was a great encourager and a scientific enthusiast who inspired others. He supervised theses by more than 60 postgraduate students and was a warm and generous collaborator with many more colleagues across the world. His friendship combined with his scientific excellence and strong motivation for public health distinguished him as a remarkable colleague.