

SEPRS Legacy Report— Dr. George C. Wall
Professor Emeritus of the University of Guam’s
College of Agriculture and Life Sciences

I was born and raised in El Salvador (El SalvaDOR, not El SALvador, please) and traveled to the United States where I earned my Bachelor of Science at the University of California, Berkeley in 1973. I attended Texas A&M University for my Master of Science, which I earned in 1983, and stayed at the university to complete my Ph.D. in Plant Pathology three years later.

It wasn’t until 1986 that I joined the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and the Agricultural Experiment Station as an Assistant Professor at the University of Guam. I had been hired due to my experience in tropical crops and their diseases.

In 1986, the college did not yet have its own building, but because it was considered a land grant college it was soon possible to get the funding to build one. The existing building was finished in 1996, if I remember correctly. It was a privilege to be part of the planning. Few researchers get to design their own laboratory. Before that, I had a couple of rooms in a residential house at Dean’s Circle, where my assistants and I tried our best to function under aseptic conditions in order to do bacteriological, mycological and viral research

The first real challenge I faced as a newcomer at UOG was in 1987, when a new disease (fruit blotch) was devastating many watermelon fields on Guam. I was able to identify a bacterial pathogen and show that it came in with imported watermelon seeds. A year later, watermelon growers in North America were facing an outbreak of this same disease, never before seen there. They learned about it from one of my publications— most notably that that it was seedborne. Growers sued seed companies, and they immediately started looking into the matter, resolving the problem a couple of years later by modifying how they process watermelon seeds before packaging.

Before retiring, I managed to put together a very well-equipped molecular biology lab to do RNA and DNA work. This allowed me to prove that a devastating disease of coconuts was caused by a viroid, composed of only a single circular RNA molecule, known as Tinangaja, and that it was transmitted mechanically (by machetes, etc). This information was key to preventing its further spread and is what I view to be one of my legacies at the university today.

The research work I did on plant diseases resulted in finding ways to help our growers manage their disease problems and increase their production and profits. Our local community also benefited by having more produce available on the market shelves, benefitting our economy as well. Examples are the watermelon fruit blotch outbreak, a virus disease of yard-long beans, anthracnose of yams both on Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas (CNMI), stem rot of banana, yam rust and taro blight in the Federated States of Micronesia, papaya ringspot and bud rot of palm trees on Guam and the CNMI, cassava blight, tinangaja disease of coconuts, and many others.

Every year I presented papers at professional and non-professional meetings and conferences nationally and internationally. Many of these papers were published in peer-reviewed scientific journals. I was even asked to write a chapter in a book on viroids.

Many students worked at my lab in the many years I worked at UOG. Mr. Roland Quitagua worked with me on papaya and other crops for several years; he eventually went to the University of Hawaii (UH), where he earned his master's degree. Now he works at the College of Agriculture at UOG. Mr. Joe Sanchez, now deputy superintendent of curriculum and instruction at Department of Education, worked on a project to find viral enemies of a bacterial pathogen at my lab for a few months when he was a student. Drs. Lee Yudin and Aubrey Moore first came to Guam to work on a project I had together with several professors from UH. There were many more.

My years at the university have been memorable and productive. My main advice to current and future professors and instructors is to watch out for free advice. Having said that, remember why it was you came here. If it happened to be that you dreamed to do good for the people of Guam, then never forget it and go all in for it.