



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

“Heroes and Role Models: Wangari Maathai”

by Rebecca Goldin

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A role model is someone who inspires us, someone who shows us the way. My role model is Wangari Maathai, the founder of the Green Belt Movement. It is an environmental group in Kenya. The Green Belt Movement helps rural women and the environment at the same time.

“It's the little things citizens do. That's what will make the difference. My little thing is planting trees.” Wangari Maathai

Wangari Maathai was born in 1940 in a rural part of Kenya. When she was growing up there were a lot more trees and brooks and streams with the wildlife that lived in them than there are now. She was born during the time of British Colonialism in Africa when the British took over parts of Africa to take the natural resources for their own and to rule the Africans.

Even though Maathai grew up in a British colony, she didn't have much to do with the British except that her father farmed on a landlord's land and in return got to have a little land for himself. In those days women didn't really get an education, and if they did the only jobs they could have were nurse or teacher. However, Maathai's older brother asked why she did not go to school as he did. Her mother then decided that Wangari would go to school too. At first she went to local schools. Then in 1952 for the first time Africans from Kenya rebelled against British rule. This was called the Mau Mau rebellion. During this time Wangari Maathai attended a boarding school with nuns. Finally she got a Kennedy scholarship so she could go to college in America. She studied biology and stayed away from home for 6 years.

When Wangari Maathai returned from America she saw many changes and problems in Kenya. Instead of farming to feed themselves, more and more farmers were planting commercial crops like tea and coffee and having to buy expensive food elsewhere. The new foods were not as healthy as what they had eaten before and they also required more fire wood to cook. As a result women had to go further and further to collect firewood because they were running out of trees. Another problem with the deforestation was that without the trees and their roots the soil just washed away and dirtied the drinking water. The food the Kenyans were eating did not nourish them and many children were getting diseases due to malnutrition. Wangari Maathai has said:

“Poverty is both a cause and a symptom of environmental degradation”

The women blamed the government for their problems, but Wangari Maathai said once we realize we are part of the problem then we can come up with a solution. Her solution was to plant trees. At first it did not work and most of the trees died. But that did not stop Wangari Maathai from trying. She started with the women and showed them how to find the seeds and

plant them. She taught them to water and tend the trees and compensated them for every tree that lived past 3 months. At first she used her own money, and then got sponsorships from friends and even corporations such as Mobil. Nobody thought that women could do anything and foresters even said that you needed a diploma to plant trees. But Wangari Maathai did not listen and the Green Belt Movement was born in 1970. In the 40 years since then people in the Green Belt Movement have planted over 30 million trees in Kenya, and more all over the world.

Wangari Maathai did not just plant trees, she did much more. She had many connections throughout the Green Belt Movement that told her about what the government was planning to do, and she protested against many policies that were unfair. For instance, at one point the government was giving away public land to make friends with other politicians. She wanted to protect the forests and the public parks for the people of Nairobi. First she wrote many letters and of course, as expected, they were ignored. Then she took action. She and a group of others snuck into a building site even though the government had hired thugs to protect the area. There they planted trees. Wangari Maathai tried to be peaceful but many protests ended with police violence, hospitalizations, and arrests.

She never stopped fighting and she always succeeded. In another case mothers of political prisoners wanted their sons to be released from jail. They were in jail for disagreeing with the government. But when the government changed the laws they disagreed with they were never released. Wangari Maathai and the mothers went on a hunger strike at a corner of Nairobi Park, which they called Freedom Corner. Eventually they moved to a church basement for safety. But they continued protesting for over a year. During that time many men came to tell their stories of torture at the hands of the government. The women sang to keep up their spirits, never losing hope. They took turns hunger striking so that they would not lose their strength. It is an old African tradition that you must respect any woman old enough to be your mother. That was why their protest was so powerful. Eventually, after a year of hardship, all the political prisoners were released. This protest worked partly because Wangari Maathai was able to be a threat to the government by getting the media involved.

People encouraged Wangari Maathai to become a politician so that she could make larger changes. She decided to try and many times she lost elections. People didn't vote for her for many reasons. She was a woman, she was divorced, and she was independent. In her culture women were supposed to stand by their man and obey all men, but Wangari Maathai didn't do that. Wangari Maathai became famous throughout the world but was still disliked by many in her own country. In December of 2002 she was elected to parliament and two years later she won the Nobel Peace prize. Now she is continuing her work and speaking around the world. She has been awarded many prizes and honors such as the Earth Hall of Fame in Kyoto Japan and the NAACP Chairman's Award. She has said:

"In a few decades, the relationship between the environment, resources and conflict may seem almost as obvious as the connection we see today between human rights, democracy and peace."

Values are personal ethics. Some of the values I share with Wangari Maathai are: wanting to better the world, hard work, family, and compassion for animals. She said:

“We do the right thing not to please people but because it is the only logical reasonable thing to do as long as we are being honest with ourselves even if we are the only ones.”

She fights for what she believes is right and doesn't stop even if no one believes in her or people tell her not to try. I hope some day I can be as inspiring as she is.

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