

VOICES

By Christopher Connell

An Interview with Nobel Peace Prize Laureate **WANGARI MAATHAI**

Changing the World, One Seedling at a Time

FOR PLANTING TREES AND PROMOTING DEMOCRACY IN KENYA, Wangari Muta Maathai was denounced as “a madwoman” and repeatedly arrested by former president and strongman Daniel Arap Moi. Her unstinting efforts also won the former veterinary medicine professor and founder of the Green Belt Movement the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize—the first environmentalist ever to receive the honor. As an associate professor and department chair at the University of Nairobi in the 1970s, she conceived the idea that paying poor women to plant trees could alleviate poverty and slow the destruction of forests—lands already so devastated that these rural women could not even gather enough firewood to cook for their families. In less than three decades the Green Belt Movement has planted 30 million trees grown from its own seedlings and nurseries across Kenya and in more than a dozen other countries. Maathai, after withstanding years of harassment and arrest at the hands of Kenya’s former ruler—she led protests that scuttled Moi’s plans to have a 60-story skyscraper with a huge statue of himself erected in Nairobi’s Uhuru (“Freedom”) Park—is now herself a member of Parliament and Kenya’s assistant minister for environment and natural resources. As the Norwegian Nobel Committee said in announcing the Peace Prize in October 2004, “Peace on earth depends on our ability to secure our living environment.” Wangari Maathai “stood up courageously against the former oppressive regime in Kenya.... She represents an example and a source of inspiration for everyone in Africa fighting for sustainable development, democracy and peace.”

Dr. Maathai, who will deliver a keynote address at NAFSA’s 2006 annual conference in Montreal, Canada, on May 23, is the daughter of Kenyan farmers from the Kikuyu community who owned a small farm at the foot of Mount Kenya. She excelled in primary school and then at Loreto Convent Limuru Girls High School, taught by Catholic missionary sisters. A scholarship enabled her to head off in 1960 at age 20 to Atchison, Kansas, to attend college. She was in the vanguard of a generation of several hundred of Kenya’s best and brightest who received opportunities to attend college in the United States during the Kennedy years. Maathai has called President John F. Kennedy, who extended a

hand to help Kenya in its transition from British colonial rule to democracy, one of her heroes.

Maathai earned a bachelor’s degree in biology in 1964 at Mt. Saint Scholastica College, a Roman Catholic women’s college in Atchison, Kansas, then a master of science degree at the University of Pittsburgh in 1966. She returned to Kenya to work as a research assistant at the University of Nairobi, where a German professor and mentor encouraged her to pursue further studies in Germany. She won a fellowship from DAAD, the German Academic Exchange Service, and spent two years at the University of Munich before returning to complete her doctoral degree



MARTIN ROWE

in anatomy at the University of Nairobi in 1971—the first woman in East or Central Africa to earn a Ph.D. Within five years she was chair of the Department of Veterinary Anatomy and increasingly active in the struggle for women’s rights, not just in government and academe but in Kenya’s rural hamlets.

In advance of her NAFSA speech, Dr. Maathai agreed to answer questions from NAFSA’s *International Educator* as she traveled in Kenya on behalf of her Tetu constituents and for her work as assistant minister of the environment. Despite the valiant efforts by her daughter, Wanjira, and by Emily Triebel, the U.S. representative of the Green Belt Movement, it proved impossible to reach the perpetually busy Maathai by cellphone during those travels, so Dr. Maathai responded by e-mail to a list of questions. Here is that exchange.

Q&A with Wangari Maathai

IE: You came of age as Kenya escaped colonial rule and gained independence. Please tell us a little about your early life and how you came to be selected to study in the United States.

MAATHAI: I was raised in Nakuru (Rift Valley) in my very formative years and then in Nyeri. My parents were farmers. Schools in Kenya were based on the British system of education so I joined this school system as a young girl and attended mainly Catholic schools.

In 1961, President Kennedy launched a program that was to bring the brightest of Africa’s brains to the United States to train and then return to lead and build our nations. I was one of those students selected to be part of what came to be known as the “Kennedy Lift.”

IE: How did you wind up at Mt. Saint Scholastica, now part of Benedictine College in Kansas?

MAATHAI: I was attending a Catholic high school with links to the Benedictine Order, so it was an easy connection for me to attend Mt. St. Scholastica. I have wonderful memories of my time at the Mount. I was inspired greatly by the deep sense of service demonstrated by the nuns who cared for us and taught us. They gave so much of themselves for the common good. I recalled those days recently for the alumnae magazine:

I was surrounded by women who treated me as if I were their daughter. They did everything to help me, educate me, and enrich my life. I had already benefited from a full scholarship, yet I continued to receive so much more. I think this is partly where I got my deep sense of service and my detachment from things material. On a daily basis, I saw women working hard for higher goals and inner peace. This must have impacted my own conscience and values as I matured.

[In that same *Threshold* magazine, Sister Thomasita Homan, who was one of Dr. Maathai’s invited guests at the three-day Nobel Peace Prize ceremonies in Oslo in December 2004, paid tribute to her former student in a poem that said the nuns *dream with you of a world / green and glorious and / at peace.*]

IE: You were the second African woman to study at Mt. Saint Scholastica. How much did students and faculty know about Kenya and about Africa? What career did you imagine for yourself at that point?

Dr. Maathai will address the assembled international educators at the opening plenary session of the 2006 NAFSA Annual Conference in Montreal, on May 23. For more information on the 2006 conference, please visit www.nafsa.org/conference.

MAATHAI: Very little was known about Africa at the time except for stereotyped representations like Tarzan and others. I imagined myself becoming a teacher one day.

IE: You were teaching anatomy to veterinary students when you founded the Green Belt Movement in 1977. Would you see yourself as what, in the United States, is sometimes called “a tree hugger”? What motivated you to become an environmentalist, and what made you think that planting trees could hold back the tide of development and destruction?

MAATHAI: I would not consider myself a “tree hugger” in the sense that it is seen in the United States. My work and commitment to environmental conservation is very much a function of how communities live within the environment that sustains them. We always look at the environment and its relationship to communities living adjacent to critical ecosystems and governance, for example. My motivation to start GBM was to address the very basic issues women in rural areas were facing: lack of water, fuel, and income. I did not set out to address issues of poor governance. These issues became evident as we went deeper into the process.

IE: Many were surprised and delighted when they heard you had won the Nobel Peace Prize, putting you in a pantheon alongside the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., Andrei Sakharov, Mother Teresa, Lech Walesa, Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi, and Jimmy Carter. It was perhaps less surprising to those who knew you as not only an environmentalist but a crusader for democracy, and human rights. Please explain the nexus between planting trees and planting the seeds of democracy.

MAATHAI: The planting of trees is the planting of ideas. By starting with the simple step of digging a hole and planting a tree, we plant hope for ourselves and for future generations....The Green Belt Movement addresses a wide range of issues that directly affect the lives of individuals, particularly women and their families, including education, access to water, equity, and reproductive health. People then begin to stand up for their rights and those of their communities. It is their empowerment that truly leads them to decide to prioritize the environment, good governance, and cultures of peace.

IE: Is there anything you learned as a college and graduate student in the United States during the civil rights struggles of the 1960s that helped you when you were harassed, beaten, and imprisoned by the former government of Daniel Arap Moi?

MAATHAI: I have always been guided by the spirit of patience, persistence and commitment. These three words have continued to teach me a lot about reaching for the stars.

IE: Your daughter Wanjira holds two degrees from Emory University and has worked for President Jimmy Carter’s Carter Center. How strongly did you encourage her to study abroad? [Maathai

has three grown children]

MAATHAI: Although my children studied abroad, it was not something that they were aware of before they completed their high school in Kenya. They knew that studying abroad may be an option but the first option was studying at home. I did not discourage them but rather encouraged them to work hard wherever they ended up. Because I studied abroad I was not anxious about sending them overseas.

IE: In a memorable BBC interview two Decembers ago, a young African woman called in from Mississippi and said she wanted to change the world as you did, but was afraid there were no opportunities for her if she went back to Africa. Your response was to tell that young lady in a very friendly but firm manner: “Come home! We are the ones who are supposed to create the opportunities. Come home!” How often do you face questions like that? Was there ever any doubt in your mind when you were in Kansas that you would return to make your life and career in Kenya?

MAATHAI: I face such questions all the time. When I was a student in the United States, it was always very clear to me that I would return to Kenya. I wanted to.

IE: The last *Open Doors* report said the number of Americans studying in Africa jumped 18 percent in 2003-2004 to 5,700. What is your message to Americans considering where to study abroad? What can they learn in Africa—and especially in Kenya and other East African nations—that they might not learn in the more frequented stops in western Europe?

MAATHAI: I would encourage all students, African, American, European, Asian—wherever they are from—to consider studying abroad. We are living in very interesting times. Times that call for us to understand each other genuinely and work together across cultures. I have always believed that as global citizens we have a responsibility to nurture cultures of peace wherever we go. We must dialogue with each other, respect one another and reach out whenever necessary. This we can only do when we understand each other. It is encouraging to see that Americans studying in Africa increased by 18 percent over the past year. This is just wonderful. They will have an image of Africa that is based on their experiences and relationships rather than propaganda.

IE: Finally, a new day has begun in Kenya. You are now a member of Parliament and an assistant minister of environment in the newly elected government. Is it harder to fight for what you believe in from the inside rather than as an outsider?

MAATHAI: Being in government has been a wonderful experience. I have spent most of my life advocating for change, particularly political change and in 2002 we managed to make the change we sought. As a member of Parliament I have the privilege of participating in the creation of legislation. If we can ensure that good legislation is created, our nation is better served. I love to serve. I get a lot of satisfaction from working for the common good. **IE**