

Wangari Maathai (1940-2011)

Wangari Muta Maathai was a Kenyan environmentalist and politician who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 for her work on the Green Belt Movement. She was the first black African woman to win a Nobel Prize. Her compassion for the planet and its inhabitants, partnered with her determination and fortitude, empowered a generation of women to sow the seeds of change.

Early Life

Wangari Maathai was born in Nyeri, Kenya in 1940. She lived on a farm with her parents and siblings. Whilst her father worked, Wangari's mother looked after the home – a role that was expected of women who were not seen as equals to their husbands. Many men viewed their wives as their property and women were sometimes treated badly by their own husbands. Wangari helped her mother collect water and firewood and she also helped plant and grow crops to feed their family. Although girls were not encouraged to go to school, Wangari was exceptionally clever and her brother persuaded her parents to let their sister attend school when she was 8 years old.

Education

With the support of her family, Wangari attended the local primary school where her brothers were also students. Despite being a girl, Wangari excelled in her classes and moved to a boarding school where she learned to speak English. She finished top of her class and was honoured to attend an all-girl high school. In 1960 Wangari was one of only 300 Kenyan students to be granted a scholarship to university in America. Wangari studied biology in Kansas where she completed her degree and then went on to earn a master's degree in biology at the University of Pittsburgh in 1966. Whilst in America, Wangari observed her classmates and realised how outspoken they were, they spoke out against the air pollution in the city. She learned that people, even women, have the right to speak for what they believe in. When Wangari returned to Kenya she continued to attend university in Nairobi and in 1971 became the first woman in central and east Africa to earn a doctorate degree.

The Green Belt Movement

Upon returning to Kenya, Wangari became aware of the devastating changes that had occurred since being away in America. Farmers were told to grow crops to sell to other countries, such as tea and coffee. In order to accommodate the demands, large areas of forests were cut down to make room. Unfortunately, this caused devastation to local families. Women were unable to collect firewood, unable to grow food and unable to use water because of the polluted streams. Wangari, influenced by her classmates in America, decided to do something about it. She wanted to reforest her home and support women in her village. In 1977, with the support of the National Council of Women, Wangari started the Green Belt Movement, an organisation which gave women money for planting trees.

Wangari's Impact

In 1989, Wangari learned that Uhuru Park was to be destroyed to make room for government offices. Wangari, determined to keep the park green, did all she could to stop them from destroying the park. With support from the Green Belt Movement, she made petitions, held protests and asked other countries to help. But the government would not listen, the President attempted to stop the Green Belt Movement and made fun of the women, telling them to be quiet and respect men. In 1992, when the park was due to be destroyed, Wangari stood in the park's corner for three days to stop the trees from being cut down and draw attention to the fact that other protesters were wrongfully imprisoned. The police beat her so badly that she was taken to hospital. People all over the world were horrified by what had happened and rallied to support Wangari. As a result, the park was not destroyed and the government offices were built elsewhere. Thanks to Wangari you can still enjoy Uhuru Park and stand in Freedom Corner, the place she stood to stop the destruction.

Wangari's Legacy

Although powerful men in government ridiculed the women and their efforts, the Green Belt Movement planted over 30 million trees. Additionally, 30 thousand women were

empowered to learn skills, earn money and consequently improve their lives. Women were taking control of their lives and the environment was improving. Despite her conflicts with the president, Wangari had a huge impact in politics during her lifetime and introduced policies which ensured the protection of the environment and better treatment for women. In 2004, thanks to her incredible, courageous work to prevent deforestation, Wangari Maathai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. She was the first black African woman to ever win this prestigious award. Wangari died in 2011 but her legacy lives on through the work that the Green Belt Movement still do across Africa and can be observed in the independent woman of Kenya who know how to take control of their own future.