Profile: Wangari Maathai

Wangari Maathai rose to prominence fighting for those most easily marginalized in Africa - poor women.

In 1964, Wangari became the first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a doctorate degree, and set off on a path to improve her nation of Kenya. She became a professor at the University of Nairobi in the 1970s.

She went on to establish an organization in 1977 - primarily of women - known as the Green Belt Movement, aiming to curtail the devastating effects of deforestation and desertification in Kenya. The Green Belt Movement is a tree-planting scheme promoting both the empowerment of locals and environmental conservation.

Her desire was to produce sustainable wood for fuel use as well as combating soil erosion. But the Green Belt Movement went on to also campaign for education, nutrition and other issues important to women.

"It took me a lot of days and nights to convince people that women could improve their environment without much technology or without much financial resources."

Her campaign to mobilize poor women to plant some 30 million trees has since been copied by other countries, which has led to the planting of billions of trees in over 30 nations worldwide.

Mrs Maathai has been arrested several times for campaigning against deforestation and political corruption in Africa. During the regime of President Daniel arap Moi, she was imprisoned several times and violently attacked for demanding multi-party elections and an end to political corruption and tribal politics.

But this did not deter her. In 1997, she ran for president against President Daniel arap Moi. Although she made little impact in this presidential run, she showed that she was willing to stand up to the authoritarian and corrupt president.

"To me the whole continent, especially south of the Sahara, is facing the same challenges and the main challenge there, as I have said many times, is governance."

"People get leaders they deserve," she continued. "So if they are getting leaders in Africa that are not caring about us, it's because they let them."
"If we want a responsible leadership, the African people have to rise up and demand that kind of leadership from their leaders."

“It is the people who must make their leaders change. And we cannot be intimidated. So we must stand up for what we believe in,” Wangari said.

But with President Moi’s retirement in 2002, Wangari Maathai was elected to parliament with 98% of the votes in 2002 elections. She went on to be appointed as a deputy environment minister in 2003.

In 2004, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her work.

As the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize, she was praised by the awarding committee as "a source of inspiration for everyone in Africa fighting for sustainable development, democracy and peace".

The Nobel Peace Prize committee praised her for taking "a holistic approach to sustainable development that embraces democracy, human rights and women's rights in particular".

“It is another example which shows that women can create a positive impact beyond their communities,” said Sasha Henriques.

"Maathai stood up courageously against the former oppressive regime in Kenya," the Norwegian Nobel Committee said in a statement announcing her as the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner. "Her unique forms of action have contributed to drawing attention to political oppression.”

In 2006, Maathai was one of the founders of The Nobel Women's Initiative along with sister Nobel Peace Laureates, including Jody Williams, in a united effort for peace with justice and equality. It is the goal of the Nobel Women's Initiative to help strengthen work being done in support of women's rights around the world.

In 2009 she was recognized as a UN Messenger for Peace. The UN recognized Maathai for her exemplary work in support of the environment, democracy and women’s rights. With her new status, Maathai will join eleven other UN messengers of peace who advocate on behalf of the UN.

Maathai also is concerned about the vulnerability of Africa in the light of a Western thirst for resources.

“We are being exposed to a new wave of colonialism," says Maathai. "There is a grab for resources. We are vulnerable to anyone who wants to exploit us. It's like the 18th-century. Africa finds herself with raw materials but does not have the ability to add the technology. She cannot control the process.”

The leader in this neo-colonialism, she says, is China, which has invested tens of billions of dollars in the last decade to extract African oil, minerals, timber and land in return for roads and jobs.

"China is really no different from the United States, the Soviet Union and the colonizing European nations which facilitated the rise of African dictators and protected them in the post-colonial period,
despite knowing of their corruption and cruelty, so they could continue to extract Africa's resources unhindered. If Africa had spent 40 years investing in education, acquiring skills, she would be in a better position now."

Wangari passed away in September 2011 from cancer at the age of 71.

"She belongs in the league of Nelson Mandela. Someone who fought for others and never thought of herself, working tirelessly to advance the freedom and dignity of others without expecting anything in return," Professor Shadrack Gutto of the Centre for African Renaissance Studies at the University of South Africa said.

ASSIGNMENT:

Act as if you are Wangari Maathai and you are coming to speak to the students at Bellows Falls Union High School. What do you want them to know about women in Africa? What would you tell them about your life that could inspire them? Your goal is to give them a positive outlook on the future of Africa and for women throughout the world, so good luck!
Barack Obama (left), his wife Michelle (right) and Prof Wangari Maathai (centre) at Uhuru Park, Nairobi in August 2006 before Obama was President and was then a U.S. Senator from Illinois.

A picture taken in April 1999 shows Wangari Maathai (L) challenging hired security people in the Karura Forest, in the Kenyan Capital Nairobi, during a Green Belt Movement operation aimed to plant trees.