

## Wangari Maathai (easy version)

Wangari Maathai was born in Kenya in 1940, in a town called Nyeri.

Kirk's father, Ray, was a businessman. For many years he had owned a factory in Canton. When Kirk finished school he took a job in his father's factory and kept living with his parents.

Wangari was a good student and when she finished high school, she was given money to study in the United States. She spent six years there.

When she came back to Nyeri in 1966, she was very unhappy about what she saw. When Wangari was a child everything around Nyeri had been green. There had been trees everywhere. But now all the trees were gone. They had been cut down and the land had been used for farms. Rain had carried a lot of the earth off the sides of the hills, because there were no trees to hold it down.

Wangari saw that a beautiful place had become ugly. She also saw that a rich place had become poor. She saw hungry children. She saw people living in very poor houses. She had not seen these things when she was a child.

Wangari kept on studying for a while in Kenya, and then she got a job teaching at a university there. Soon she got married and had three children.

In the years that followed, Wangari got interested in helping poor people. Because of what she had seen happen around Nyeri, she thought it would be possible for poor people to help each other and to help their country by planting trees.

In 1977, Wangari began the "Green Belt Movement." The idea was to put a "belt" of green around cities and towns. The people working in the Green Belt Movement were almost all poor women who had never been to school. They were paid fifty Kenyan cents for every tree that lived longer than three months.

The Green Belt Movement was a good thing for Kenya in many ways. It gave jobs to poor people who had trouble finding work. And it meant that, in the future, it would be easier for poor people to find wood to cook their food. It was also good for Kenya's forests, which had been getting smaller and smaller. The trees were good for farmers too because they meant less earth would be washed away by rain. They also gave people a place to sit in the shade, away from the sun. Another thing that was important to Wangari was that the trees made Kenya more beautiful.

Before long, Wangari saw that one reason Kenya's forests had been getting smaller and smaller was that people in the government had been stealing forest land from ordinary Kenyans. Sometimes they used it for their own farms. Sometimes they gave it to rich people.

**holding down:**  
stopping earth from being washed away

**kept on:**  
continued

**washed away:**  
removed by water (erosion)

**were to blame :**  
were the ones who harmed (hurt) the forests

**were against:**  
were fighting, were enemies of

**spoke out:**  
complained (criticized) publicly

**beaten up:**  
hit many times (and hurt)