

***Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai***  
**Q & A: Lisa Merton, Co-Producer/Director**

***What inspired you to make this documentary in the first place?***

In spring 2002, the Hartley Film Foundation asked us to make a short film about Wangari Maathai. She was teaching at the Yale School of Forestry for a semester so we went there to meet her. Our interview went on for several hours. It was intense. We were struck by her presence, and deeply moved by her story and her courage.

After the initial interview, we immediately started thinking about a feature-length documentary. We knew we had to go to Kenya, a journey that had not been part of the initial short film concept. We needed to spend time with the women of the Green Belt Movement, experience the rhythm of their lives and familiarize ourselves with Wangari's world.

***How did you prepare to do this documentary?***

Because we were working on another production, we couldn't go to Kenya until June 2004. After raising some funds, Alan Dater, co-producer/director, filmed in Kenya for three weeks. During that time, he established relationships with the Green Belt Movement (GBM) staff and members of some of the tree nurseries. He also traveled with Wangari to Tetu Constituency, her constituency in the Central Highlands where she was elected Member of Parliament in 2002.

We immersed ourselves in the cultures of Kenya by looking at films and reading. We connected with Kenyans living in Vermont and Americans who had lived in Kenya for extended periods. We established contact with Wangari's grown daughter, Wanjira, who became an additional link to Wangari and her work. The best preparation came from being in Kenya, interacting with Kenyans, and following the thread of Wangari's story from rural women to journalists to former political prisoners.

***When Wangari won the Nobel Peace Prize in October 2004, how did this impact film production?***

It changed everything. We went from having to explain to people who Wangari was, to then making a film that would live up to a tremendous icon who was receiving media attention around the world for her vision and leadership in environmental activism. Once she won the prize, there were others who wanted to document her story, but her loyalty to our efforts and early commitment prevailed.

We got to Kenya in November 2004, as quickly as possible. We filmed numerous Nobel related events: press conferences; the Nobel Laureates Panel during the Nairobi Summit on a Mine-Free World; and many formal celebrations and gatherings. It was a whirlwind. Most of this footage did not end up in the film. However, during this trip we journeyed to Malaha in the Western Province where we filmed Green Belt Movement nurseries in

Bukusu communities. Several people from Malaha became important characters in the film. From Kenya, we flew with Wangari to Oslo for the Nobel ceremony. It was a fantastic and moving experience.

***You presented a point of view that seems to resonate with Wangari's essence, how she is in the world. Was that your intention?***

We have a common experience with Wangari in that we grew up on the land. Alan grew up on a dairy farm in western Massachusetts and I grew up in rural Vermont. This was at a time, in the 1950s and 1960s, when there were still many family farms. These farms and the people who worked them influenced how the whole community viewed their place in the world. In many ways, Wangari's experiences of childhood are different from ours, yet the rhythms of her daily life and her connectedness to the earth are familiar to us.

***Who else emerged as major characters in the film?***

In a way, the women of the Green Belt Movement are a character in this film. They have such strength, joy, and connection to themselves and the earth. One woman, Naomi Kabura Mukunu has been planting trees with her group of women since 1987. They have planted a small forest that has helped to change the microclimate in their region. Naomi was forcibly removed from her land, her house burned and her animals stolen during the Mau Mau war in the 1950s. She is a no-nonsense, strong and humorous person who is clearly an anchor in her tree nursery and her community.

The staff of the Green Belt Movement is deeply dedicated to the Movement and many of them have risked their lives standing up for environmental and social justice. Some of them have been with the organization from the start, for over 30 years. Kinyanjui Kiuno is one of the facilitators of the Civic and Environmental Education Seminars that the Green Belt Movement gives all over Kenya. Working with problems, causes and solutions, he teaches the impoverished, marginalized and silenced citizens how to become activists and leaders in their own communities. Thousands of Kenyans, from rural villagers to the military, have participated in these seminars.

***This story is incredibly inspiring. Has it had an impact on your life?***

Yes. I realized, more deeply than ever before, in learning about the history of colonialism and subsequent oppressive regimes in Kenya, that the mechanism of oppression, whether it is global, national, communal or familial, is utterly destructive of peoples' dignity and their connection to themselves and to their environment. By taking action to improve their degraded environment, the women and men of the Green Belt Movement are empowering themselves to protect their lands, to take back their voices, and improve their circumstances. Thus, they are changing the mechanism of oppression and passing on a different story to their children. This story has further instilled in me a sense of awareness and passion to critically dissect oppressive structures and fight for a more just world.