

# Wangari Maathai, Nobel laureate and environmentalist, dies at 71

WASHINGTON - Wangari Maathai, a Catholic environmentalist and political leader who became the first black African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts to empower women to work for environmental, economic and social justice, died Sept. 25 after a bout with cancer. She was 71.

A graduate of Mount St. Scholastica College - now Benedictine College - in Atchison, Kan., with a degree in biology, Maathai became widely known and respected for her efforts on behalf of environmental sustainability through tree-planting campaigns that developed around the world.

Maathai's efforts in founding the Green Belt Movement and on behalf of human rights in challenging former Kenyan dictator Daniel arap Moi led to her being awarded the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize.

In 1989, Benedictine College named Maathai - who was known as "Mary Jo" at the school - as a co-winner of its Offeramus Medal, established by Mount St. Scholastica in 1957 to recognize alumnae "who have served others significantly in the spirit of Christ."

In a 2004 letter to the Benedictine Sisters at the college, Maathai said the sisters "became more than my teachers. They became my friends, mothers and sisters."

"They touched my life so profoundly and made it so much better then ... and now," she added. "They made the Mount my home and gave me the most wonderful four years, which have partly made me who I am and may ever become."

Sister Thomasita Homan, a member of the Benedictine Sisters of Mount St. Scholastica, got to know Maathai in the mid-1980s while she was director of alumnae affairs at the college. She maintained that friendship for more than two decades, even attending the Nobel Prize award ceremony in Oslo, Norway, in 2004.

"Everyone there recognized her goodness and strength and that's what they were

really affirming,” Sister Thomasita told Catholic News Service Sept. 26.

“To a person, she really affects you in a way that it’s not just a story,” Sister Thomasita said. “You’re going to be moved to the same kind of hope, the same kind of faith and same kind of courage.

“That’s a part of the reason Wangari Maathai is so important to the world. She does not act on her own. She acts in a way that you become one with the movement to whatever needs to be done to improve our world,” she added.

Stephen Minnis, Benedictine College president, recalled Maathai’s last visit to campus, Jan. 28, 2007.

“Her talk was on leadership, activism and the Benedictine spirit,” Minnis told CNS Sept. 26. “She really did credit the sisters and the Benedictine way of life as being very influential on her life and the way she helped build community in Kenya.”

In 1971, Maathai became the first woman in East Africa to receive a doctoral degree, graduating from the University of Nairobi. She received a master’s degree from the University Pittsburgh in 1966 before returning to newly independent Kenya.

Maathai married in 1969 but divorced in the 1980s after her husband, a legislator, accused her of being “too educated, too strong, too successful, too stubborn and too hard to control.”

A biography on the Green Belt Movement website said Maathai was born in the village of Ihithe, near Nyeri in Kenya’s Central Highlands, April 1, 1940. As a young girl she was taught by Catholic missionary nuns and graduated from Loreto Girls’ High School in 1959.

In the 1970s, Maathai became active in the National Council of Women of Kenya and began meeting with rural women, learning about the deteriorating environmental and social conditions affecting poor Kenyans. Their concerns focused on a lack of firewood for cooking and heating and the scarcity of clean water, leading to a shortage of nutritious food, according to the biography.

Maathai suggested the women plant trees because the effort could provide wood for cooking, fodder for livestock, material for fencing, protection for watersheds and stability for soil, thus improving agriculture, the biography said. The suggestion marked the beginning to the Green Belt Movement, which has led to the planting of more than 47 million trees in Kenya.

The effort initially was met with resistance by the Moi government, which labeled the movement “subversive,” The New York Times reported. During one protest against the government, police beat Maathai unconscious.

In 2002, five years after an unsuccessful run for the country’s presidency, Maathai was elected a member of the Kenyan Parliament. She subsequently was appointed assistant minister for environment, natural resources and wildlife. She also traveled the world, discussing environmental sustainability and the dangers of climate change to the world’s most vulnerable people.

With Maathai’s assistance, the United Nations Environment Program adopted a worldwide tree planting campaign in 2006. More than 1 billion trees were planted within months, and the campaign has set a goal of planting 14 billion trees, the Green Belt Movement reported.

Maathai is survived by three children and a granddaughter.