

# Little by Little: Global Citizenship through Local Action Inspired by Wangari Maathai

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*I always felt that our work was not simply about planting trees. It was about inspiring people to take charge of their environment, the system that governed them, their lives and their future.*

—Dr. Wangari Maathai<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Wangari Maathai – “environmentalist, human rights advocate, global peace worker, and community builder” – passed away in 2011. The first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, Dr. Maathai left a legacy even greater than the 47 million trees that her organization, the Greenbelt Movement, has planted across Kenya since 1977. As the Nobel Prize committee lauded in 2004, “She has taken a holistic approach to sustainable development that embraces democracy, human rights and women’s rights in particular. She thinks globally and acts locally.”<sup>2</sup>

Like Dr. Maathai, Iowa teacher Jessica Staudt seeks to encourage global thinking and local action in her fourth-grade classroom. To honor and share Dr. Maathai’s legacy, Jessica developed a service-learning project that integrates critical literacy and social studies themes to promote an active, global vision of citizenship. Service learning, an educational strategy that purposefully connects academic curriculum with community service and student reflection, is an apt vehicle to encourage global thinking and empower students to take action.<sup>3</sup> Jessica’s student-driven service-learning project supported several national social studies standards, including 3) People, Places, and Environments, 9) Global Connections, and 10) Civic Ideals and Practices.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Maathai serves as a fitting and unique, role model for a service-learning project, providing a compelling example of global citizenship at work.

## Community Concerns

Early in the school year, Jessica’s students shared their concerns about graffiti in their local community. Several students noted the inappropriate language used in this graffiti and how they were upset that people were vandalizing their neighborhoods



Wangari Maathai receives a trophy awarded to her by the Kenya National Human Rights Commission in 2006 for her contribution towards humanity.

(Photo: Demosh/commons.wikimedia.org)

and school building in this way. Some students were concerned that their younger brothers and sisters were exposed to such language on overpasses and train cars while waiting for the school bus in the morning. One student noted the impact of such graffiti on her future, stating, “Someday we might have kids, and we won’t want to take them to the park to play with the graffiti everywhere.” Students knew that they wanted to take action to improve their community by reducing or eliminating this graffiti, but were not sure where to start. Jessica, a first-year teacher, recognized this as a ripe opportunity for a service-learning project that would put citizenship at the heart of her social studies teaching and began working to integrate this effort into her curriculum.

## Identifying a Role Model

As students shared their concerns and sought to take action, Jessica learned about the life and work of Dr. Wangari Maathai. She recognized that Maathai could serve as a fitting role model for her students by providing an example of an active, globally oriented citizen who effected systemic change through local action. Though an African woman might seem an unlikely source

of inspiration for her young Iowa students, Jessica realized that Maathai's life and wisdom could serve as a guide for action in any local community. She explained, "Dr. Maathai began with what she knew to impact unthinkable change. That is what my students always need to do: start with what they know."

### Literacy Integration

Jessica introduced Maathai to students by reading and comparing multiple children's literature texts chronicling Maathai's life and work. In sharing these texts, Jessica supported students as they activated and built schema, or background knowledge, of Maathai, which promoted deeper reading comprehension.<sup>5</sup> She further guided students to make connections among the texts they explored, as well as between the texts and their own personal life experiences, integrating these literacy strategies with social studies content.<sup>6</sup>

Jessica began by reading aloud Jeannette Winter's accessible book *Wangari's Trees of Peace*. After reading, students brainstormed text-to-self connections, making a list of similarities between themselves and Maathai. For example, students noted that Maathai cared about her community the way they cared about theirs. They also observed that the Kenyan government did not take Maathai seriously at first, and, in a similar vein, some people might not perceive children as agents of change. These first connections showed that a spark had been ignited by Maathai's biography, encouraging both teacher and students to continue.

Next, Jessica read *Mama Miti* by Donna Jo Napoli, and students continued to discover text-to-self connections. To help students organize and clarify their expanding ideas about Maathai, Jessica created a large, four-column chart on which students could record their thoughts on what Maathai's biography tells us about taking care of the environment, being an active citizen, and being a woman in a political environment run largely by men. This chart was continually evolving, as students added new ideas on sticky notes throughout the course of the project.

After reading two texts, it was clear that the narrative of Maathai's life had begun to have an impact on the fourth-grade students. For instance, students were inspired by Maathai's active citizenship, sharing that Maathai taught them to "only play your role in the world not someone else's," and to recognize that "if something gets in our way, we can't let it stop us." One student explained that Maathai taught her, "Women can do anything they believe they can," while another learned, "We might start

small, but, in the end, it's pretty big." Jessica noted that in their reflective writing and discussions, students frequently referred to the text-to-word connections made in this chart.

After reading *Mama Miti*, students created character maps where they described "what Maathai thinks, sees, says, feels, does, teaches, loves, where she goes, and where she lives." Following this lesson, Jessica challenged students to complete a character map describing an "active citizen," which afforded students the chance to apply their ideas about Maathai to the concept of citizenship in the community and in the world. Students shared that active citizens such as Maathai see "good in people's hearts," feel "proud, powerful, and generous," say, "I won't let this happen" when they witness injustice, and teach others to "take part in the world and care."

Finally, students read *Planting the Trees of Kenya: The Story of Wangari Maathai* by Claire Nivola. After reading this book aloud, Jessica utilized a world map to enrich students' understanding of Maathai's global reach. Students began by locating Kenya on the map and later plotted all of the countries that Maathai visited to go to school, receive awards, or give speeches about her efforts. This geography activity helped students visualize Maathai's global impact and recognize that small local efforts can have ripple effects around the world. By mapping Maathai's work, "it really hit home for them that although she was only planting trees in one location, her impact was truly a global phenomenon," Jessica recalled.

### Listening to Maathai

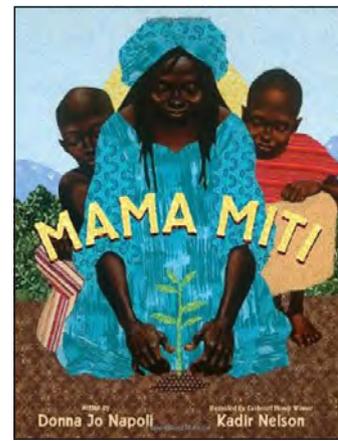
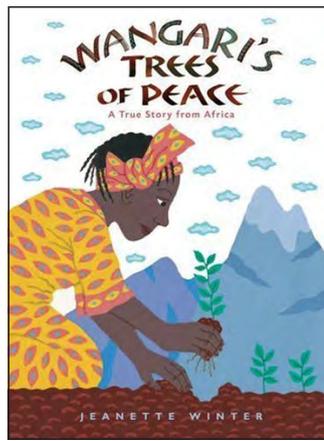
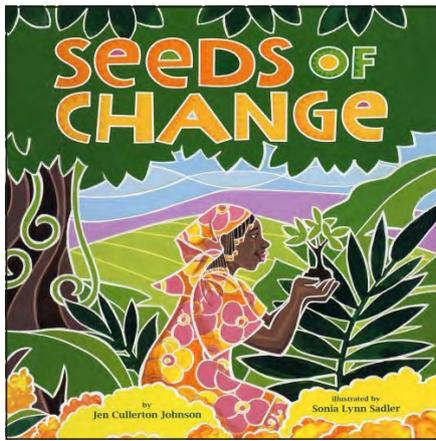
Although students engaged with Maathai through multiple texts, the connection to their role model deepened when the students were able to watch her and hear her voice. Maathai introduces and narrates a 2-minute animation "I Am A Hummingbird" in a free, online video.<sup>7</sup> This is the story of a small hummingbird doing the best it can to save an entire forest from a fire while larger, more capable animals sit by and watch. The hummingbird attacks the fire, which is destroying all of their homes, by delivering one drop of water at a time. This simple analogy profoundly illustrates Maathai's view of her own role in the world as one small being doing the best she can. Jessica explained, "Students were transfixed, listening and watching, and began to clap when it was over." Days later, students continued referring to this powerful video. One student reminded classmates, "We need to be like a hummingbird and just do our part."

After seeing this video, students referred to Maathai frequently in discussions, mentioning her in connection to other areas of study. Students even talked about Maathai after they got home,



TreeAid/commons.wikimedia.org

A boy in Mali plants a tree in 2010.



as several parents noted during parent-teacher meetings. One student recalled, “I asked my dad if he knew Wangari and he said “no,” so I told him he needed to learn about her, and I showed him the [[www.greenbeltmovement.org](http://www.greenbeltmovement.org)] website.”

### Team Effort

Inspired to take actions to improve their own community, students deliberated and decided to raise awareness in their school about issues of vandalism, with the goal of reducing graffiti seen around the school building and on the playground. After setting this goal and brainstorming some ideas, the students figured out the best plan of action, engaging in a shared decision-making process.<sup>8</sup> As Jessica described it, “The kids liked each of the ideas and decided that they could actually put all of them into practice. They’d just need to split up in order to do it.”

The students decided to call their service-learning project “Little By Little WE CARE” (Challenging All to Reduce and Erase) and soon organized themselves into five teams that would take action in different ways:

- The “Cleaning Crew” communicated with school custodians and scheduled a time for the class to help clean the walls of the bathroom stalls to remove any graffiti.
- The “Poster People” created graffiti-style, spray-painted posters with anti-graffiti messages to hang around the school. This team also encouraged students to use chalk and write “positive graffiti” on the school grounds, reclaiming the art form as a tool for student voice and positive expression.
- The “Script Superstars” wrote and produced a provocative anti-graffiti video that was posted on the class website, sites. [google.com/site/missJessicasclass/graffiti-project](http://google.com/site/missJessicasclass/graffiti-project).
- The “Technology Team” guided development of a webpage, “Little by Little WE CARE” on Jessica’s classroom website and suggested related blog prompts to which students could respond. They also utilized the class iPad and Flip camera to document the project through videos and images.
- The “Publicity Pals” wrote letters to the principal and parents, explaining the project and students’ goals. This team also wrote updates for the website and class newsletter and led discussions within the classroom where they invited each group to share their progress.

Each team spent several weeks working on their individual action tasks. Each day, team members also shared their progress with classmates and offered support for each other’s work. Throughout the process, Jessica encouraged students to record their reflections and progress on paper, on the class blog, through pictures, and on the class iPad, which they used to record meetings and keep team notes.

In the end, students’ efforts resulted in a school cleaned of graffiti, educational posters, a positive graffiti mural, an anti-graffiti video, student blog reflections, and a webpage that can be shared with others in Iowa and around the world. By integrating technology into their service learning efforts, the fourth-graders were able to realize their goal of effecting global change “little by little,” starting locally, in their school, then sharing their model of active citizenship widely through their website, blog, and video.

### Overcoming Obstacles

Like Maathai’s work to plant trees and build a better future for Kenya, Jessica faced challenges as she sought to interpret her service-learning project through the lens of global citizenship. Working in a Title I school, Jessica regularly had students pulled out of her classroom for reading and math services. Coupled with frequent standardized testing during the spring semester, Jessica found it difficult to find time when the whole class was available to participate in the project. Even more challenging was finding time to incorporate service learning and social studies lessons into the daily curriculum, despite support from the school’s principal. Jessica quickly realized that she needed to integrate this project with her literacy block, utilizing these lessons to meet both literacy and social studies standards. Jessica used the four texts as read-aloud books during her regular literacy block, encouraging students to ask questions and engage in discussions of the texts to support literacy skills as well as build an understanding of Maathai as an active citizen. Further, Jessica used several literacy-specific strategies, including character maps, graphic organizers, and text-to-self charts, to help students better engage with Maathai and meet literacy standards. She also allowed students to work with their teams during guided reading time, as so much of their work involved

## Children's Literature

Johnson, Jen Cullerton. *Seeds of Change: Wangari's Gift to the World*. New York: Lee and Low Books, 2010.

Muldrow, Diane. *We Planted a Tree*. New York: Golden Books, 2010.

Napoli, Donna Jo. *Mama Mita: Wangari Maathai and the Trees of Kenya*. New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2010.

Nivola, Claire. *Planting the Trees of Kenya: The Story of Wangari Maathai*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009.

Winter, Jeannette. *Wangari's Trees of Peace: A True Story from Africa*. Orlando, Florida: Harcourt, 2008.

Yahgulanaas, Michael Nicoll. *Flight of the Hummingbird: A Parable for the Environment*. Sydney, Australia: Greystone Books, 2008.

Zalben, Jane Breskin. *Paths to Peace: People who Changed the World*. New York: Dutton Children's Books, 2006.

reading and writing for a purpose.

Despite obstacles, Jessica persisted with the project, believing in the benefits of teaching young people about being active, global citizens. Working in a school in which more than 70 percent of students receive free and reduced lunch, Jessica recognizes the great challenges that her students faced in their lives outside of school. She believes that service learning provided an outlet for students to feel connected to their community and worthwhile in their actions. "It was wonderful to see students so excited about their learning and hear them making connections between Wangari's life and their own experiences. Projects like this open students to learning on their own, giving them an outlet to think and produce materials that truly demonstrate all they are learning."

### Becoming Global Citizens

Jessica's service-learning project tackling graffiti and vandalism at school is not an uncommon one, but her approach was unique. To inspire local action, she thoughtfully turned to a global leader to motivate and empower her students. In utilizing Maathai as a role model, Jessica provided her students with a powerful vision for global citizenship and community action.

Learning about Maathai's legacy helped students to see that each of their individual actions, even in a small town in Iowa, can have ripple effects in their state, country, and world. As one student explained, "Maathai encourages us that we may be one small person, but we can make one big difference." By connecting students' graffiti concerns with a global role model like Maathai, the project was imbued with a profound sense of purpose that extended far beyond the task of cleaning up graffiti. This study of Dr. Wangari Maathai, and the subsequent oppor-

## Online Resources

The Greenbelt Movement, [www.greenbeltmovement.org](http://www.greenbeltmovement.org)

*Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai*, [takingrootfilm.com](http://takingrootfilm.com)

Nobel Prize Biography of Wangari Maathai, [www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/2004/maathai-bio.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2004/maathai-bio.html)

Nobel Prize Lecture by Wangari Maathai, [nobelpeaceprize.org/en\\_GB/laureates/laureates-2004/maathai-lecture](http://nobelpeaceprize.org/en_GB/laureates/laureates-2004/maathai-lecture)

*New York Times* Obituary of Wangari Maathai, [www.nytimes.com/2011/09/27/world/africa/wangari-maathai-nobel-peace-prize-laureate-dies-at-71.html?pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/27/world/africa/wangari-maathai-nobel-peace-prize-laureate-dies-at-71.html?pagewanted=all)

tunities to take action, left a deep impression on these students. In their end-of-the-year letters to next year's fourth graders, many students indicated that they hoped the new students would get to know and be inspired by Maathai, as they had. One student wrote, "Have you ever heard of Wangari? Wangari is loyal, outgoing, and she never gives up." Another student pondered, "We are doing a graffiti project where we try to stop graffiti. I wonder what you guys will do?" We, too, wonder in what other ways Maathai might inspire, motivate, and empower young people to act as citizens of the world, and what extraordinary actions future generations will take as they follow Maathai's path. 🌱

### Notes

1. The Green Belt Movement, Nobel Peace Prize, [www.greenbeltmovement.org/wangari-maathai/the-nobel-peace-prize](http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/wangari-maathai/the-nobel-peace-prize).
2. The Green Belt Movement (see note 1).
3. National Youth Leadership Council, *K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice* (Saint Paul, Minnesota: National Youth Leadership Council, 2008).
4. National Council for the Social Studies, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010), [www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands](http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands).
5. Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis, *Strategies that Work: Teaching Comprehension for Understanding and Engagement* (2nd ed.) (Portland, Maine: Stenhouse, 2007).
6. *ReadWriteThink*, International Reading Association/National Council of Teachers of English, [www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/making-connections-30659.html](http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/making-connections-30659.html).
7. The Green Belt Movement, "I Am a Hummingbird," [www.greenbeltmovement.org/get-involved/be-a-hummingbird](http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/get-involved/be-a-hummingbird). Also available on YouTube. This story also appears in a chapter in the book *Flight of the Hummingbird: A Parable for the Environment* by Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas (New York: Greystone Books, 2008).
8. Walter Parker, *Teaching Democracy: Unity and Diversity in Public Life* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 2002).

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