

## SUNDAY LUNCH WITH . . . 2004 NOBEL PEACE PRIZE LAUREATE

# 'Americans like to fix things quickly. They don't understand why problems linger'

DEBRA PICKETT



e-mail:  
dpickett@  
suntimes.com

**T**his is a very interesting kind of meeting," Wangari Maathai says politely. "I have never been to a meeting like this one."

She has spent most of the last day and a half inside the cavernous halls of McCormick Place, a guest at the direct sales company Shaklee's giant annual meeting, an almost-evangelical affair with splashy awards presentations for top salespeople, singers, dancers, a laser light show and a full gospel choir.

For Maathai, a 2004 Nobel laureate and the first African woman to win the Peace Prize, the setting is more than a bit overwhelming. Though she smiles brightly, warmly greeting all of the pumped-up salespeople eager to take a picture with her, her eyes look tired and, she says later, she'd really like to put her feet up. But this is what it is to be a Nobel Prize winner, especially one with a foundation that is still in need of money to fund its development projects.

Maathai, 65, who has spent most of her life in Kenya, has circled the planet — nearly twice — since her surprise elevation to international heroine status last year. A member of the Kenyan parliament, she has had to receive special permission to miss legislative sessions. And she has given up much of the day-to-day control of the Green Belt Movement, the organization she founded 30 years ago to call for environmental conservation, good governance and women's rights.

"The prize and all it entails," she says, "is so big that I guess for the rest of my life I will be exploring it."

## 'Think globally — act locally'

We've stolen a few moments in a waiting room behind the stage at McCormick Place's Arie Crown Theater to talk, while just outside, the Shaklee meeting continues with a series of testimonials from salespeople who say they've gotten rich selling the company's nutritional supplements, personal-care products and cleaners. Maathai, who — thanks to a 1960s initiative that brought students from newly independent African countries to study in the United States — attended tiny St. Scholastica College in Atchison, Kan., seems bemused by the utter American-ness of the event she's attending today. Shaklee is a major donor to the



Wangari Maathai, who says she never expected to win the Nobel Peace Prize, considers herself an environmentalist. —BRIAN JACKSON/SUN-TIMES

Green Belt movement — today, CEO Roger Barnett presented Maathai with a check for \$105,000 — but it is also an organization of people who are utterly focused on making lots and lots of money.

America, Maathai observes, is "a country where if you don't take care of yourself, it will turn away from you."

"I have always been very warmly received in the United States," she says. "There has always been support from Americans for our project. But [Americans] also get very quickly discouraged by what they see [in Africa]. Americans like to fix things quickly. They don't understand why problems linger."

Maathai's project — enlisting rural women to plant trees across Kenya, thus improving the country's ecology and, through a small stipend program for volunteers, offering them some income to help support their families — is a classic example of "think globally — act locally" environmentalism. It is also a Sisyphean exercise in battling the forces of nature, corporate capitalism and the land-grabbing corruption that plagues modern Africa.

In many ways, Maathai says, she is still fighting the same battles she was when she left a prominent academic position — she chaired the department of veterinary anatomy at the University of Nairobi — to found the Green Belt Movement in 1977.

"The needs are still there," she says, "particularly the need for clean drinking water."

who came into office in 2002 in the wake of the first free and fair elections most Kenyans ever experienced, has pledged reform. Maathai, whose campaigns against land-grabbing and deforestation had placed her squarely in opposition to the rule of former President Daniel arap Moi and led to several arrests and at least one violent beating at the hands of police, is now a member of parliament and a deputy minister for the environment.

But HIV/AIDS has devastated the generation of working-age adults who might have performed the labor of caring for the land. And, many say, the corruption that characterized the Moi regime still dominates much of the decision-making in Kibaki's administration. The incredible feeling of optimism present in the country in 2002 — the elections were "a great victory for democracy, a people's power," Maathai says — has waned, leaving a certain weariness in its wake.

Maathai manages to see hope in this mood of popular dissatisfaction. At least, she says, it is not the cynical complacency of the Moi years.

"People have a deeper sense of fairness" after the elections, she says, and since they expect more from their government now, they are complaining loudly about any improprieties.

"I am hoping people will not let go," she says, "and, from what I see, people are not letting go. Even the struggles are good, in my opinion. They have a good challenge,

the challenge of a strong society with a good opposition."

Maathai is an optimist. She has had to be.

## A hero to women of Africa

"Sometimes," she says, "I have to tell people — because they think there is no good news in Africa — well, I am good news."

She never expected to win the Nobel Peace Prize, or anything even nearly like it. She considers herself an environmentalist, first and foremost. She agitated for democracy and political change, she says, because "if you don't have resources sustainably managed and equitably distributed, you won't have peace."

So, she now tells people, the Nobel committee, in recognizing her, recognized for the first time the inextricable links among democracy, good governance, peace and environmentalism. They also recognized the incredible, and long-suffering, women of Africa, to whom Maathai — whose husband divorced her, saying she was "too educated, too strong, too successful, too stubborn and too hard to control" — is a heroic sister.

Maathai tells me quietly that we will not be able to have lunch together — the CEO and some top executives have requested her presence at their table — but that we can continue our conversation after lunch.

"Perhaps," she says, "we can find a place to sit outside for a moment. A place with trees."

But her world has changed, for the better and for the worse.

## Post-election optimism wanes

Democracy has come to Kenya, and the president, Mwai Kibaki,

A CHICAGOLAND INSTITUTION SINCE 1959

# Danley's Garage World

LOW-RATE FINANCING

OPEN 7 DAYS

1ST TIME OFFER!



ELECTRIC INSTALLATION

(\$500 Value) AND

## GARAGE DOOR OPENER

(with 2 remote controls)

Included With Any Custom-Built Garage\*

Offer Ends 8/31/05

For a FREE ESTIMATE or to see our models, dial (773 or 847)

G•A•R•A•G•E•S

MEMBER SINCE 1959

Models on display in Bellwood at St. Charles & Mannheim Rds. (773 or 847)-427-2437

\*Electric is for basic package. Opener not installed. Not valid on prior sales or with other offers. Photos for illustration only.

www.danleysgarageworld.com Se Habla Espanol