

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT

Voleine Amilcar, ITVS	415-356-8383 x 244	voleine_amilcar@itvs.org
Mary Lugo	770-623-8190	lugo@negia.net
Cara White	843-881-1480	cara.white@mac.com

For downloadable images, visit pressroom.pbs.org/programs

For the program companion website, visit pbs.org/independentlens/takingroot

“TAKING ROOT: The Vision of Wangari Maathai”
Premieres April 14, 2009 on the Emmy® Award–Winning PBS Series Independent Lens

***Inspiring Story of Kenya’s Wangari Maathai, the Nobel Peace Prize Winner
Who Changed the World by Planting Trees***

“Today we are faced with a challenge that calls for a shift in our thinking so that humanity stops threatening its life-support system. We are called to assist the earth to heal her wounds and in the process heal our own.”
—Wangari Maathai

(San Francisco, CA)—Is it really possible for one person to change the world? In the case of Wangari Maathai, the answer is a resounding yes. Inspiring and uplifting, **TAKING ROOT: The Vision of Wangari Maathai** is the story of a woman whose stand for peace and justice was as strong and immovable as the trees she planted. The wisdom of Maathai was that she understood the intrinsic connection between her people and the natural environment, an environment that had dramatically eroded through decades of British colonialization, poverty, civil war, and the Kenyans’ own exploitation and mismanagement of resources. But by planting trees, Maathai and the rural women she worked with were able to restore not only the land, but also their culture, their heritage—even their lifeblood.

A transformative story of one woman’s personal journey in the context of the turbulent history of her country, **TAKING ROOT** will have its television premiere on the PBS series *Independent Lens*, hosted by Terrence Howard, on Tuesday, April 14, 2009, at 10 PM (check local listings).



Scenes from TAKING ROOT: The Vision of Wangari Maathai, coming to Independent Lens April 2009



Born and raised in the rural highlands of Kenya, Wangari Maathai remembers a childhood spent in a verdant Eden, surrounded by green trees and clear streams from which to gather firewood, food and water. Educated in Catholic schools, she developed a strong sense of justice and a desire to help others. In 1960, Maathai, one of the brightest and best of her country, was selected for a Kennedy Scholarship, enabling her to travel to the United States with a group of other students (including Barack Obama Sr.) for study abroad. She studied biology, earning a master's degree from the University of Pittsburgh. This opportunity changed Maathai's life, opening her eyes to new worlds, yet renewing her dedication to return to her homeland. Once back in Kenya, Maathai became the first woman in East Africa to earn a Ph.D. (in veterinary medicine). She began teaching at the University of Nairobi, where she became the first woman to chair a department.

In addition to teaching, Maathai returned to her roots by reconnecting with the rural women with whom she had grown up. She discovered that their lives had become intolerable: firewood and clean water were scarce, the soil was eroding, and children were malnourished. Maathai remembered the greener paradise of her childhood and thought, "Why not plant trees?" Trees could solve all of those problems. This realization led Maathai to found the Green Belt Movement, a grassroots organization encouraging rural women and families to plant trees in community groups.

A seemingly innocuous idea, Maathai soon discovered that the movement to restore the landscape was bearing more fruit than that which grew on trees. In the mid-1980s, Kenya was in the grip of the repressive dictator Moi, who forbade group gatherings and the right of association. But in tending their Green Belt nurseries, women had a legitimate reason to gather outside their homes and discuss their problems. Soon the women found themselves working not only against deforestation, but also against poverty, ignorance, embedded economic interests and political oppression. A spirit of hope and confidence grew in these ordinary citizens, and they became a national political force. But the government was determined to quell the growing Green Belt Movement.

TAKING ROOT documents the dramatic confrontations of the 1980s and 1990s and captures Maathai's infectious determination and unwavering courage. Kenya's fight for democracy finally prevailed. In 2002, a new coalition government was democratically elected, and Maathai became a member of the new Parliament and Assistant Minister of the Environment and Natural Resources.

Today there are more than 6,000 Green Belt nurseries throughout Kenya, generating income for 150,000 people. Thirty-five million trees have dramatically altered the physical and social landscape in various regions of the country. The Green Belt Movement has also started programs teaching women about indigenous food crops, income-generating activities, HIV/AIDS and self-empowerment.

Through intimate conversations with Maathai, whose warm, powerful and luminous presence imbues much of the film, **TAKING ROOT** captures a worldview in which nothing is perceived as impossible. The film presents an awe-inspiring profile of one courageous woman's 30-year journey to protect the environment, ensure equality between women and men, defend human rights, and promote democracy—all sprouting from the simple act of planting trees.

To learn more about the film and the issues, visit the companion website for **TAKING ROOT: The Vision of Wangari Maathai** at pbs.org/independentlens/takingroot. Get detailed information on the film, watch preview clips, read an interview with the filmmaker, and explore the subject in depth with links and resources. The site also features a Talkback section for viewers to share their ideas and opinions.

About the Filmmakers

Alan Dater and Lisa Merton (Producers/Directors)

Alan Dater and Lisa Merton have been working together on the production of documentary films since 1989. Their productions include: *Home to Tibet*, a film about a Tibetan refugee's return to his homeland, shown on many PBS stations and screened at the International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam; *Bridge of Fire*, the story of the collaboration of a Japanese potter and a Vermont potter, winner of a Cine Golden Eagle and the Best Media Work at the Montreal Festival of Films on Art (also screened at the Museum of Modern Art and the Louvre); *Wolf Kahn: Landscape Painter*, a portrait of the well-known American painter, winner of a Cine Golden Eagle; and *The World in Claire's Classroom*, a documentary on a veteran Vermont public school teacher's extraordinary vision of teaching children how to appreciate diversity and how to respect themselves and others.

Alan Dater graduated from Goddard College in 1965 with a B.A. in philosophy. He began his film career in New York City, working on documentaries as a freelance soundman and later as a director/cameraman. Many of these productions were broadcast on major U.S. networks. The films include: *Lifeline*, an Emmy® Award-winning medical documentary series for NBC; *The Body Human*, an Emmy® Award-winning medical series for CBS; and multiple *National Geographic Specials*. He has gained extensive experience in film and video from working on many productions on the arts, social issues and education as well as for the corporate world. These productions include the feature film *Hi, Mom*, directed by Brian De Palma and starring Robert De Niro, and the documentary *Johnny Cash: The Man, His World, His Music*.

Lisa Merton started out as a weaver. She studied textile design and weaving in Scandinavia, and after returning to the United States, she worked professionally as a weaver for 10 years. While studying in Norway, she was inspired by a series of tapestries that depicted the occupation of Norway by the Nazis. Her intent was to weave tapestry and use it as an art form for social change, but instead she ended up as a production weaver. It was not until she started making films in 1989 that she fulfilled her intent to weave images that could inspire social change. She has a master's degree in teaching English as a second language (ESL) and has taught ESL in multicultural classrooms. She brings her interest in education, cultural diversity and social change as well as her skill as a craftsman to the filmmaking process.

About *Independent Lens*

Independent Lens is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing on PBS. The acclaimed anthology series features documentaries and a limited number of fiction films united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement and unflinching visions of their independent producers. *Independent Lens* features unforgettable stories about unique individuals, communities and moments in history. Presented by ITVS, the series is supported by interactive companion websites and national publicity and community engagement campaigns. *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts. The series producer is Lois Vossen. Further information about the series is available at pbs.org/independentlens.

###