

We're in this together.

Five True-to-Life Stories to Inspire Creative Climate Activism



By Rivera Sun

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Rosalinda and the Cloud Catchers



Rosalinda did not want to leave the mountains of Peru. She loved her home with the tin walls that chattered in the wind. She was born in this valley shaped like a bowl. She did not want to move to the city and leave behind her Abuela Jacinta and her aunts, uncles, and cousins. It wasn't fair! It wasn't her fault the thin mists that swept across the ridges never quite gathered into rain anymore.

Once, the trees and plants that carpeted the slopes had caught the mists, but those were gone. Every year, it grew drier and rockier and lonelier and hungrier. Mama did not have enough water for her garden. Without that, what would they eat? No tomatoes. No squash. No corn.

Her father had decided that the family would go to the city to find work. If her father, mother, and brother found

jobs, they could earn enough to send some money back to help the rest of the family. Rosalinda's mother promised that she would like her new school in the city — the classrooms even had microscopes and chemistry sets. She knew Rosalinda loved science.

"I like Abuela's science lessons," Rosalinda stated.

"Bah," her grandmother answered, "you're getting too smart for me. If you go to the city schools, maybe one day, you'll be an inventor and make new things."

But Rosalinda could see sorrow in Abuela Jacinta's old face. Her grandmother hugged her close. Rosalinda felt a tear hit her dark brown hair.

If only the rain would fall instead of tears, she thought.

She ran outside. The misty clouds slid past in a whispering hush, tickling her skin, and refusing to fall in drops.

If only we could catch them, Rosalinda wished.

If only they could round up the clouds like sheep. Or cast a net like the fishermen do in the sea. Rosalinda spread her fingers wide and tried to imagine fishing for moisture. It would have to be a net as fine as a cloth and as big as a hillside. Maybe they could wring the water out of it like the laundry they washed in the metal bucket.

Unless, Rosalinda mused, her imagination racing, the nets were made of metal or something slippery. Then it would drip down like water off the roof.

Every morning, before the sun burned the mists away, the tin roof of the house collected a sheen of moisture. It pooled on the edges of the rippled metal then dripped down. Her mother grew herbs underneath the overhang. The smelly goats always tried to eat them. Rosalinda had to chase them away twenty times a day. One time, she'd tried to put up a tarp to fence them out, but her favorite goat had licked the moisture, nibbled the plastic, choked and nearly died.

Rosalinda's eyes widened. Plastic would work! It would catch the mist, then the water would drip down from its sleek surface. She couldn't use a tarp — the wind would blow it away. She needed a net of plastic. What could she use?

Aha! Rosalinda had an idea. Tio Roberto had a whole heap of old bags bundled behind his house. She dashed between the houses to ask if she could use them. He gave them to her, gladly. What else was he going to do with them?

Rosalinda had seen her grandmother, mother, and aunts weaving. She had learned the basics. She cut the bags apart, then started to weave the little strips into a stronger net.

"What are you doing?" her abuela asked.

Rosalinda explained, her head tilted to the side in concentration as she worked.

“I am going to fish for mist.”

Her brother overheard and told her she was crazy, but her grandmother was smart and inventive. She sat down on an overturned bucket and listened carefully to Rosalinda’s idea.

“Where will the water go when it drips off the net?” Abuela Jacinta asked her.

“Into a gutter then into a barrel then into a hose that we can move around the garden,” Rosalinda answered.

Her grandmother sent Rosalinda's brother to go find a section of gutter. She sent her sister to get a length of hose. She made Rosalinda's father roll over a big barrel. She asked all of Rosalinda's aunties to help weave the net of strong plastic.

"Rosalinda," her abuela explained, "has an idea. We must build a net big enough to catch a whale, but fine enough to sift water from the air like a sieve."

After days of work – and a fair amount of grumbling from the family – they had done it. The massive net stood upright at the top of the dry hill, billowing in the wind. No one thought it would work, but as the thick mists slipped through, the woven strands beaded with moisture. Gravity pulled the droplets downward. They dripped into the gutter, ran down its length, and trickled into the barrel like a tiny stream. Everybody cheered.

With water, they could plant their corn and squash and potatoes and tomatoes. With the garden, they could feed their families. With food, they did not have to move to the city.

"It's *un milagro*, a miracle!" her mother cried.

"No, Mama," Rosalinda corrected. "It is science, an invention."

"A miracle and science," her abuela said. "It's both."

Rosalinda's cloud catchers fed her family. They turned dry, dusty slopes green again, not just with gardens, but with wild plants, too. When the bushes and trees grew taller, they caught the moisture from the air in their broad leaves. When Rosalinda grew older, the story of her cloud catchers won her a scholarship to university. She studied engineering, but her abuela told everyone she was getting her degree in two subjects:

Miracles and science.

Behind the Story

This story is fiction. Rosalinda did not invent the fog nets ... but someone did and they really work. In the high mountains of Peru, there are cloud catchers just like the one Rosalinda builds with her family. Huge, plastic netting is hung on the ridges to siphon the moisture from the air. It is channeled into buckets and a hose is used to water the garden. As the plants return to the dry slopes, their fronds and leaves begin to do the same thing as the nets. The process is called “reverse desertification” and it helps to restore an ecosystem. [You can watch a video about this here.](#)

In Rosalinda’s story, it is important to collect the water so the family can grow their own food. If they don’t, they have to move to the city to earn money and support their family. Rosalinda and her parents would become climate migrants — people who leave their homes because the environment can no longer support human habitation. In

2017, there were 18 million climate migrants — and that number is growing each year. From droughts to forest fires to unbearable heat to floods and rising sea levels, the rapid changes in the climate due to human impacts are forcing people to flee their homes.

Rosalinda’s story has many parallels throughout the world. One movie, [*The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*](#), tells the true story of a Malawian youth named William Kamkwamba who invented a way to pump water up from the ground with a windmill. In other places, youth inventors are coming up with low-cost solar energy designs, fuel-efficient stoves, [*machines that clean-up plastic from the oceans*](#), and much more. Local people have smart ideas for solving our pressing concerns about the environment. Young people, especially, have a good reason to think of bright ideas for the future — it’s their future!

Faridah and the Tangled Knot



Faridah woke before daybreak. The sky above the city rooftops and distant hills gleamed gray as she left the house, water buckets in each hand. If she hurried, she'd beat the long line and return in time for school. She was lucky. Her family apartment was close. Other students, Halimah and Laela, had stopped coming to class entirely. The well was a long way from their homes. By the time they reached it, waited among hundreds of others filling buckets, and then lugged them back, half the day had vanished.

Faridah hurried through the paved streets. At the corner, her friend Noura joined her. Behind the veil of her *niqab*, Noura's eyes were still sleepy. The two girls took their usual short cut behind the grocer's shop. Here, the street narrowed into an alley and they hopped over the rubble of

a crumbled building. Like many places in Yemen, the streets of their city bore the scars of war. Bullet holes riddled the concrete walls on the next block. Faridah avoided looking too closely at them. When she was little, she'd tried to count the holes. She had run out of numbers.

The walk took twenty minutes with empty containers. It would take a full half hour when they returned with the heavy jugs full of water. Faridah and Noura were strong, but they still had to rest.

"Look," Noura said when they arrived. Their plastic jugs clunked together as she nudged her friend's elbow. "There's no one in line."

They ran the last steps. As the jugs filled, Faridah took their money to the office and paid the fee. The man looked grumpy. When she returned outside, she saw why: Raziya was here again. She was one of those university women who had returned after graduating. *To stir up trouble,*

some people said. Faridah disagreed. She liked the young woman. Raziya had courage.

Raziya and her fellow university graduates were trying to fix the water problem. It hadn't always been like this. When Faridah was a small child, she remembered green gardens on the rooftop of her family's apartment and big trees outside the door. It had been cool and shady. Back then, the faucets still worked. Girls went to school instead of walking all day to get to the well. The water didn't cost as much, either.

That was before the fight over the water. In the conflict, men came to blows, people were shot, and the pipes were broken. Now, no one could agree on anything. Faridah's mother grumbled that the men cared more about fighting than fixing.

It's easy for them to do nothing, Faridah thought, they don't have to get up early to lug water around.

"There will be a meeting with the water officials," Raziya was telling Noura by the water pump. "We want everyone to come. Will you tell your mother and sister?"

"The officials won't do anything. They never do," Noura complained. She switched the container under the spigot.

"That's why we must all go, all of us women, and even the younger girls like you."

Faridah let out a gasp. Women and girls didn't go to those meetings. Raziya went on, speaking fiercely, and making an even more daring suggestion: if the men wouldn't agree to fix the pipeline, the women would interrupt the meeting. They would raise their complaints and propose the solutions. They would sit down in the middle of the meeting and not leave until the situation was resolved. All of the young women from the university would be there. They had spent the last year speaking to thousands of people in the city about the problems. They

had even found someone to pay to fix the broken pipe. They just needed the men to agree to the plan.

"Faridah, you should come," Raziya urged.

She startled. Why her?

"You should tell them how hard the water situation has made it for you and your family."

"I'll think about it."

"Don't think too long," Raziya urged. "The meeting is tonight."

The young woman tried to persuade them further, but they had to go. Raziya shouted the time and place at them as they hefted their water jugs and started up the road. The sun was already hitting the tops of the flat roofs. They had to get home.

The water seemed twice as heavy today. Every step made Faridah's shoulders ache. She got a stitch in her

side from the heavy jugs. Her hands cramped. She stopped to catch her breath.

"Noura, maybe we should go to that meeting," Faridah said to her friend. "If only so that we never have to haul water ever again."

Noura giggled.

"Can you imagine? Just turning on the faucet and having water come out?"

Faridah smiled. She dabbed her *niqab* against her sweaty brow. It was already hot. The summers burned hotter and hotter each year. Raziya said the whole planet had a fever. Humans had been polluting the air too long. The university graduate had big plans to turn the whole city green and shady, but that would never happen so long as girls like Faridah and Noura had to haul every drop of water halfway across the city.

It was all tied together in one big knot, Faridah thought with a sigh.

Water. Peace. School. Money. Gardens. Food. Heat. Shade. Climate. Hope. Everything depended on sorting out the problem with the well.

She hefted the buckets again and started up the road. All she could do was untangle her piece of the big knot.

"Noura," she said, determined. "I'm going to that meeting. And I'm not leaving until we get the water fixed."

And that's exactly what she did.

Behind the Story

In Taiz, Yemen, three villages have been in conflict over water distribution since the 1980s. In 2011, tensions over the al-Siwari well boiled over. Violence erupted and people destroyed a 4.5 mile-long water pipe network that connected houses to the well. The communities were without easy access to water for more than eight years. Then, a group of ten young women who had graduated from university (like Raziya in the story) worked with the entire community to find an acceptable resolution to the conflict. Over the course of a year, they spoke to thousands of people, worked with technical experts, and also found a donor who would repair the pipes. They organized under difficult tensions. At one point, gunfire broke out over the water issues. Even when they had a working solution, they faced an additional hurdle: they had to convince the water authorities — all men — to agree. The women broke with tradition and attended the meeting, interrupting when the men failed to approve the solution,

and insisting that it be implemented. In the end, they succeeded. [Learn more here.](#)

Like Faridah and Noura, many young girls in Taiz, Yemen, had been forced to drop out of school because of the effort to carry water from the distant well. With the pipes fixed, they could return to their lessons. In the fictional story, Faridah realizes the many benefits of repairing the water situation — her mother can save money instead of paying for water, they can grow a garden again, and it is possible to cultivate plants and trees that can help cool the city as the climate crisis heats up. Our solutions — and our problems — are all entwined. In order to work on one, we need to address the others. Like Faridah, Noura, and Raziya, we may need to find the courage to do something unexpected, disrupt the system, and speak out for solutions. If the women in Yemen can do it, so can we.

Dev and the Elephant War



Each night was war. The elephants invaded in the dark.

They came from the forest, crashing and cracking through the underbrush at the edges of the fields. Dev's father and the other farmers stood guard in the rice paddies, firing guns at the sky, blazing bright headlights from the trucks, hurling explosives and fire crackers at the massive creatures, trying to scare them off.

Without this, the herd of elephants would eat their crop. Dev's family would starve. Each year, the beasts devoured more than half the rice. The farmers had to clear more forest land for fields. The elephants had less space, so they ate more crops. It was a nightmare.

"Go back to the forest!" Dev shouted from the window of their home. "You can eat all of the trees! Leave our fields alone!"

When the farmers and elephants fought, everyone in the village woke up. They hollered and shouted, banged pans and clanged sticks against the metal walls of sheds. The elephants trumpeted back. The dogs barked ferociously. The babies wailed. The cow that wandered freely through the village bellowed in alarm and swung her curved horns.

It was horrible. Like all wars.

Two nights ago, a baby elephant had been hit by a homemade bomb and died. Dev and his best friend, Samesh, had run out of the house. They saw the baby thrashing. She fell still.

Then, the baby's mother charged.

Samesh was nearly killed. Now, he lay pale and weak with crushed ribs and a mangled leg on a pallet in their house. His mother prayed all day long that her son would live and walk again. Dev could hear her prayers through the open window of his room. Their two houses stood side-by-side like best friends. He always knew what Samesh would have for dinner. His friend always heard what Dev and his family were talking about. When they were in too much of a hurry to use the front door, Dev and Samesh could climb through the windows, over the gap between the house walls, and into each other's rooms.

Dev couldn't sleep. He could hear Samesh moaning. His fever had risen. His leg was infected. The doctor warned Samesh's parents that he might have to amputate the boy's leg . . . if he didn't die of fever first. Dev could hear sobbing.

Samesh's mother lit the incense on the altar and renewed her prayers. Dev murmured the words along with her, his eyes squeezed tight. He would do anything to save

his friend. He would walk a hundred miles or climb the Himalayas if it would help. He did not know what he could do, though. He was sad and worried . . . and so very, very tired.

Drifting into an uneasy sleep, he dreamed that he walked to the edge of the forest and waited. He felt the heavy thud of footsteps. He heard the cracks and crashes of a huge animal coming closer. His heart hammered in his chest. His mouth went dry.

An immense, old elephant stood in front of him. He bore the scars of age and curling tusks.

Do you want to save your friend? he asked Dev in a thundering voice.

More than anything, Dev answered.

Then you must end the war between the humans and the elephants. You must make peace.

How? Dev pleaded. He was just a boy. What could he do?

The old elephant flapped his ears and explained.

When Dev woke, the roosters had not even crowed. The sky was not yet light. He had scarcely slept. He longed to shut his eyes, but there was no time! He had to save Samesh.

“Hang on,” he whispered over the windowsill to his friend. “I know how to set things right.”

Dev told his father what the old elephant had said in the dream. He told Samesh’s mother. He told the neighbors who had built the explosive that killed the baby elephant. He told each person, young and old, because he would need everyone’s help to succeed. He talked to the farmers with the land closest to the forest.

“We need to leave rice fields along the forest’s edge just for the elephants,” he explained. “They will eat there,

where they feel safer, and leave the rest of the fields alone.”

Some laughed in his face. Others scoffed. A few argued and called him crazy. But Samesh’s father supported the idea — he had heard of this working in another place. He made a deal with the farmers closest to the forest: if they would give their rice to the elephants, he would give them the same amount of grain from his own fields to make up for their losses. Dev’s father turned to Samesh’s father in alarm.

“You cannot do that! It’s nearly all of your crop. You will have nothing.”

“I believe in Dev’s dream. And, I will do anything to save my son. His life is worth it.”

“Your son will live only to starve,” Dev’s father argued. He glanced at Dev’s anxious face. “But, I will contribute some of our rice to help you.”

One by one, the other farmers agreed to give a percentage of their rice to those who gave their crops to the elephants.

As soon as it was decided, Samesh's fever broke. That night, the villagers stood, not by the forest's edge, but on the road between the closest fields to the forest and the rest of the farmland. They lit incense instead of explosives, and sang to the elephants instead of shouting.

The herd came, first one big bull — the one who had come to Dev in his dream — and then the baby's mother. They curled their trunks and flapped their ears. They took a bite of rice. Then another. All was safe. All was calm. The war between the elephants and humans had ended.

Samesh recovered slowly. Each day, Dev climbed through the window to tell him how the elephants came to eat, but stayed close to the forest. The rice grew heavy and abundant in the other fields. Without the elephants

eating so much of it, the farmers could afford to give up the strips of land by the forest.

Soon, Dev assured Samesh, you will see this with your very own eyes.

Samesh smiled. He did not need to *see* it. He could *hear it*. The dogs had stopped barking. The babies slept quietly. The people rested through the night. The wandering cow swished her tail contentedly.

The elephants and humans had made peace.

Behind the Story

This story was inspired by a segment in David Attenborough's documentary film, *The Year Earth Changed*. The film explores how the pandemic lockdowns impacted wild life and natural systems. It shows deer ranging through Japanese cities, the Himalayas becoming visible as smog decreased, sea turtles laying record numbers of eggs on empty Florida beaches, and more. One segment tells the story of how a rural Indian farming community took advantage of the economic shutdowns to employ laid-off factory workers to address a longstanding problem with elephants. Farmers and villagers had been in crisis for years. As expanding farmlands encroached on the elephants' forest habitat, the wild elephants began to devour half the crops. To stop them, the villagers engaged in nightly confrontations. They flashed bright lights, fired guns in the air, and set off homemade explosives. Several people had been trampled by the elephants.

During the lockdown, many of the villagers lost their jobs in factories and returned home to the villages. A conservation group organized five hundred people to plant a several-mile-long swath of rice along the edge of the forest. They hoped this would entice the elephants to stay closer to the shelter of the trees, and not enter the main fields. It worked. The elephants did not enter the farmers' fields once that year.

This story shows that we can find creative solutions that help both humans and animals. In this fictional adaptation, a young boy has a dream that he must make peace with the elephants in order to save his friend. His friend's father has heard of this idea working in another area and agrees to try it. We need to share the stories of what's working. We never know who might need them and whose lives we might save – including both animals and human friends.

The Boy Who Hated Fishing



Leonardo sulked in the bow of his father's boat. The sky blazed blue. The water sparkled. The wind ruffled the golden grasses along the Italian coast's pale cliffs. Many boys would be happy to be fishing with their father on such a beautiful day. But those boys were not Leo.

"If I miss school again," he complained loudly over the rumble of the motor, "the teacher will fail me. If I fail, I won't be ready for university when I turn eighteen."

Leo was counting the days when he could leave this tiny fishing village and go to a big city like Rome or Milan.

"Don't worry about that," his father, Gino, roared back, his dark curls tossing in the wind. "You will be a fisherman like me, like your grandfather and great-grandfather and *his* great-grandfather."

Leonardo doubted this very much. Each year, the catches dwindled. By the time he grew up, there wouldn't be any fish left in the sea.

“Tell me if you see the fish!” Gino boomed, hand on the tiller.

Leo turned his face into the spray and squinted. In October, shoals of silver fish called mullet came to mate along the Italian coastline. Once, they swam in groups so thick they made the water look black in patches. Leo's father said had seen sharks carving roads through the dark schools as they hunted. When the sharks lunged, the mullet fish leapt high into the air and fell like rain. Leo's grandfather claimed that he never used to bother with nets on days like that. He just let the sharks fill his boat with raining fish.

Those were the good old days. Now, they would cast a mile-wide net and hope to catch something, anything. Fishermen were an endangered species along with the fish.

Last year, his father almost had to sell his beloved boat to pay his debts. The best fish were gone from these waters. The fish that were left were hardly worth the time to catch them. They'd be out here all day. Leo would miss school again. His teacher would fail him. He'd never go to university. He'd be stuck here in an old boat on an empty ocean.

“Don't be so grumpy!” his father called to him, reading Leo's thoughts in his tight shoulders. “We can bomb the best fish up. That will be fun.”

Leo didn't think so. Other boys loved to drop the homemade explosives into the water to kill the fish and collect them as they floated to the surface. But those boys were not Leo. He thought it was revolting . . . and not fair to the fish.

It was a long day. The next day was even harder. His teacher was mad at him. His father was mad at his small catch. His mother was mad at his father for planning to go

out again after dark. If he was poaching fish beyond his licensed territory, he could be arrested and fined a huge sum. Or worse, he might be shot by an irate fisherman defending his area!

She refused to let Gino take Leo with him. Leo was relieved. If he stayed up all night, he'd fall asleep in class. Although, he could probably doze off tomorrow afternoon, anyway. Some guy from down the coast was coming to talk about fish. Boring!

But, Leo discovered that this man, Benicio, was not boring. Not at all. He was a small man with bright blue eyes. He was brown from the sun and beamed cheerfully.

"I began fishing when I was younger than you," he told the class, "but only in the last ten years have I truly learned how to fish."

Benicio came from a town many miles away. Leo had been there once on a class field trip to see the famous stone fort that had defended Puglia against the Turks. The

white-washed houses of the town were built right to the edge of the peninsula's high cliffs. You could jump off the roof and land in the water — though he doubted you'd survive.

Benicio had come to ask for their help.

“In Puglia, the other fishermen and I have created a marine reserve,” he explained. “Instead of using big nets with small holes, we use small nets with big holes. Your fathers fish every day. We only fish once a week. We make more money this way — and it's better for the whole ocean.”

Leo sat up from his slouch and paid attention. If his father could pay his bills by fishing once a week, he could go to school more often!

Benicio spoke about how the marine reserve worked, how the fish schools were growing, how the white seabeam fish were getting as large as dinner plates, and

how all the other creatures — dolphins, turtles, sharks, seals, whales — were doing better, too.

“And, because the mama fish have a safe place to raise their young, the great big schools of fish are spilling over the boundary of our little marine reserve into the nearby fishing grounds, helping other fishermen, too.”

Leo raised his hand.

“What do you need our help with?” he asked curiously.

Benicio grinned.

“Making a marine reserve here.”

If there was a marine reserve every thirty miles along the coast, he told the students, the whole ecosystem would explode with life. The fishing would be abundant not just for their fathers and them, but for their children and grandchildren.

Leo went home excited. His father scoffed at the idea. He had heard of Benicio, but he dismissed the man as a dreamer full of impossible ideas.

“It’s not impossible,” Leo argued. “They’re doing it.”

“Don’t try to teach me how to fish!” Gino harrumphed. “When you’ve been fishing as long as I have, *then* you can give me advice.”

“By that time,” Leo retorted, “there won’t *be* any fish left in the ocean.”

The next day, in the schoolyard, he sought out the sons and daughters of other fishermen. They needed a plan.

“If we want a marine reserve,” Leo said, “we have to make it happen. We have to tell everyone Benicio’s story. We have to make the grown-ups believe it is possible.”

“We should have a demonstration,” said one of the girls, “like they do for the political rallies.”

Lucia made banners with mullet and white seabeam fish on them.

Emilio came up with a chant: Our futures! Our fish!

Bianca suggested they walk out of class, like the climate strike youth were doing.

Salvatore added that they should march down to the docks.

When they did all of these, the other students joined them – and some of their parents, too! After all, Dante’s mother bought fish for her restaurant. Guiseppe’s father sold fish in his shop. Nicolas’ parents took tourists snorkeling. Daniella’s whole family had been trying to protect the ocean for years.

They marched to the docks the first time. The next time, they marched to the shops. After that, they went to the mayor’s house. By the time they went to the Fishing

Authority's office, half the town, young and old, was marching with them. Even Leo's father.

It had taken a while. Gino demanded proof. His mother wanted to see the reports about the marine reserve. They went around and around about the idea. In the end, Leo won them over. His father and mother marched with them.

On the day the marine reserve was decreed, the whole town gave a special award to Leo. He had organized his classmates. He had listened closely to Benicio's story. He had gotten the parents involved. He had dared to turn an impossible dream into a reality.

Leo hid his smile as he shook the mayor's hand.

To think, he'd done it all because he *didn't* want to fish!

Behind the Story

This story draws inspiration from a real-life example of a marine reserve called Torre Guaceto along the Italian coast. ([You can learn more here.](#)) The fishermen were struggling, overfishing the sea in order to make money. In their huge nets, they would catch everything from anchovies to dolphins. It was emptying the ocean. But then, a group of them came together and created a marine reserve. They fished only once a week, but they made huge revenues of up to \$10,000 in a day. Not only was it good for the fishermen, it was good for the fish, too. The schools of fish rebounded in the marine reserve. There were so many fish, they spilled over the boundaries and increased the catches of nearby fishermen. Just like in the fictional story, the next step in restoring the sea ecosystems is to establish marine reserves up and down the whole coast.

This short story imagines what it might be like to try to start a marine reserve. As in the story, knowing the real-life examples can help us discover what will work. After learning from Benicio, Leo organizes his classmates and they organize their parents. Together, the intergenerational group pressures the authorities to support the idea. Change happens when people work together, speak up, and push for creative solutions to pressing problems.

Nuru and the Little Park



A worthless patch of wasteland. That’s what the developers called it. They promised to transform the empty lot near Nuru’s apartment into the “Jewel of Nairobi”. Nuru’s blood boiled at the thought of the twenty-story skyscraper, full of expensive apartments and shops and offices. In Nuru’s view, the empty lot was already a jewel, a diamond in the rough set in the heart of their neighborhood. True, it was a little scraggly around the edges. The ‘pond’ was a hole in the ground that sometimes filled with rainwater. But, everyone loved their Little Park. The big city parks were too far away. It took a half hour on two different *matatus* –minibuses packed tight with twenty other people – to get there when traffic was light. And it never was.

Nuru was angry. Those developers had never played tag all day in the Little Park like she had. They had never hidden in the bushes to weep over a broken heart. They hadn't sat on the turned-over boxes by the flowering aloe, laughing until they got hiccups. The skysrise would make a lot of money for some people. It would steal a lot of joy from others.

If you do not live in this neighborhood, Nuru thought, you would not know how precious this empty space is.

It was not worthless! It was not a wasteland! It was special, like the rest of the city. Nairobi, Kenya was a beautiful place. Zebras and giraffes grazed right at the edge of the city limits. A huge, green park sprawled in the center of the shining downtown buildings. There was even a rippling lake. It was the home of Wangari Maathai, who saved the forests of Kenya, stopped the bulldozers from tearing up the city park, and launched the Green Belt Movement to protect the trees and stop the desert from spreading. All throughout Nairobi, teens like Nuru were

part of environmental clubs founded by Maathai's daughter. Last week, Nuru and her friends had put placards on the trees along the Nairobi Expressway, begging the workers not to cut down the trees as they expanded the highway.

The empty lot near Nuru's family's apartment was not a wildlife preserve, like the famous Nairobi National Park right next to the city. Zebras did not graze in the empty lot. Tourists would never pay big money to see the mice that burrowed in the dirt or the common *bubul* bird that ate the crumbs from Mr. Otieno's sandwiches on his lunchbreak. It was not like the big city park where thousands of people came to relax or picnic or hold birthday parties.

But hundreds of people loved this empty lot. Everyone in the neighborhood used it. Nuru's window overlooked the area. From here, the comings and goings had a rhythm like a dance in slow motion. One afternoon, tired of working on math homework, Nuru took out her phone and snapped a picture.

This is our Little Park, Nuru typed, uploading the photo onto social media. You may not think it is much, but to us it is a treasure we cannot live without.

Nuru tagged the environmental clubs. A steady stream of likes and comments came in. Encouraged, Nuru took another photo at sunset when Mrs. Mwangi and her children ate rice and banana in the cool shade of the palm tree. They lived in a stifling apartment over a corner store.

A little green space goes a long way, Nuru typed. It is a spare dining room with a fresh breeze.

In the morning, Nuru posted about Mrs. Kamau who took a stroll each morning. It helped her poor circulation. Mrs. Odhiambo often joined her; the doctor had ordered her to get exercise to help her diabetes.

A patch of green is like a hospital, Nuru wrote in the next post. The Little Park keeps us healthy and saves us money on the doctor's bills.

Someone posted a comment about the litter in one part of the park. Nuru's fingers flew, ready to make a defensive reply. She paused. The person had a point. The next day, she asked some friends to help clean the park.

“Why bother?” they asked. “They're just going to bulldoze it and pour concrete over it all.”

But Nuru's best friend Gasira helped her. They posted pictures as they worked. Mr. Njeri from across the street sent his sons over to help.

“He saw your post,” the older one said. “He follows your #LittlePark pictures.”

Nuru smiled and waved. Mr. Njeri waved back.

On Saturday, Nuru borrowed a bucket and hauled water to Mrs. Wanjiku's tomato plants. She grew them against the south-facing wall of Nuru's building, where the sun warmed them in the mornings.

How will Mrs. Wanjiku's tomatoes grow if they build a skyrise here? Nuru typed.

How would her bedroom get any light, for that matter? Nuru took a series of photos out the window. The sun rose over the rooftops and shot straight into the room. If they built a skyrise, all Nuru would see was a wall.

On Monday, Nuru received a surprising call. An official from the Office of Urban Parks had seen her posts. If Nuru could document all the ways the empty lot was used by the neighborhood, there was a program that could designate it an urban green space and protect it. But, there was only one week before the authorities voted on the permit for the skyrise. Nuru needed to act fast. She needed help.

#SaveUrbanGreenSpaces, Nuru typed, calling upon the environmental clubs.

The next day, a dozen youth showed up, phones in hand, ready to help. They went door-to-door, asking the

neighbors how they used the empty lot. Some people refused to talk to them. A few thought the new building would bring more money into their shops. One said the old lot was an eyesore and a nuisance. But most people had a story to tell about how much they loved — and used — the Little Park. The environmental club members took photos and wrote down the stories they heard.

Because we have an urban green space, Nuru wrote in the letter going to the commission, we have so much. We have better health. We have quiet space to think and dream. We have a place to laugh and cry. We work there and rest there. We eat our lunches and hold celebrations in the park. Students do their homework in the shade of the tree. Elders tell stories on the turned-over crates that serve as benches. Babies have taken their first steps in the grass. Friendships are born there. True loves are found. The Little Park is not worthless.

If they calculated all the ways the space gave to the local neighborhood, it was priceless. It saved people

money on medicine and office space, bus fares and work rooms. It served as playground and community center, market and living room.

On the day of the vote, Nuru could hardly eat a bite. Though it was a school day, the teacher made an exception and took the whole class to the meeting. They sat nervously on metal folding chairs, waiting.

The vote came in. Nuru's Little Park won! The urban green space was here to stay.

Behind the Story

In 2004, Wangari Maathai won the Nobel Prize for her efforts to protect Kenya's forests, establishing the Green Belt Movement. Her lifework inspired countless others. Now, Maathai's daughter and a new generation of organizers are protecting and expanding urban green spaces in Nairobi and other Kenyan cities. Nairobi is a remarkable place. It contains immense urban parks, including City Park, which Wangari Maathai protected from urban development, and Nairobi National Park where lions, zebras, and giraffes live.

The urban green spaces movement works to protect those parks and expand the smaller parks, greenery, and wildlife within the city. The youth have been putting placards on the trees threatened by the expansion of the Nairobi Expressway. They have also been raising awareness of how urban green spaces provide benefits for public health, social spaces, and increased mental

wellbeing for residents. In addition, urban green spaces provide shelter and food for numerous wild creatures that have learned to cohabitate urban spaces with humans.

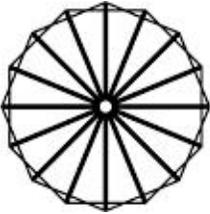
This story emphasizes the importance of the Internet and social media in Kenyan social and political life. Debate and dialog on social justice issues frequently occurs on social media platforms. For over a decade, the Internet has been used as a tool for social change, political discourse, community conversations, and more. In Nuru's story, digital tools help her show how important the park is to her neighbors and brings their concerns to the attention of public officials. Urban green spaces are important around the world. Nuru's story can help us organize to preserve these spaces near us. [Learn more here.](#)

About the author:



Rivera Sun is a change-maker, a **cultural creative**, a protest **novelist**, and an advocate for **nonviolence** and social justice. She is the author of [The Dandelion Insurrection](#), [The Way Between](#) and [other novels](#). She is the editor of [Nonviolence News](#). Her study guide to making change with nonviolent action is used by activist groups across the country. Her essays and writings are syndicated by Peace Voice, and have appeared in journals nationwide. Rivera Sun attended the James Lawson Institute in 2014 and facilitates **workshops in strategy for nonviolent change** across the country and internationally. Between 2012–2017, she co-hosted nationally two syndicated **radio programs on civil resistance** strategies and campaigns. Rivera was the social media director and programs coordinator for **Campaign Nonviolence**. In all of her work,

she connects the dots between the issues, shares **solutionary ideas**, and inspires people to step up to the challenge of being a part of the story of change in our times.



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