



As a young child, there was a story Lesein Mutunkei’s mother read to him over and over again. He loved this story, and for him it has become a touchstone.

A big fire broke out in the forest, and all of the animals ran away - even the elephants and the lions. Only the hummingbird decided to stay. It picked up water from the river with its tiny beak, and began dropping it onto the raging fire below. All of the other animals asked, “What do you think you can do? You are too little!” But the hummingbird replied, “I will do my little bit to help stop the fire. I will do what I can.” And it continued fighting the fire.

Everyone in Lesein’s country of Kenya respected the great Wangari Maathai, who shared this story with people to inspire them to join her Green Belt Movement, and plant trees to restore their country's degraded watersheds and save their livelihoods. In 2004, the year Lesein was born, she received the Nobel Peace Prize for her contributions to sustainable development, democracy, and peace. She is one of Lesein’s biggest heroes.

One day, when he was 14 years old Lesein was on his way to school, sitting in his mom’s car, when he realized something awful. He was reading about deforestation and air pollution in Kenya. Lesein loves going on hikes, cycling, and camping out in the nature. But he realized that unless something was done about these issues, soon all of this would no longer be possible.

“I decided to do further research,” he says. He learned that Kenya’s forests have suffered a lot in past decades. In 1963, when the country became independent, 12 percent of Kenya was covered in forests. By 2015, the forest cover was down to only 7.6 percent. “I calculated that in Kenya, we were losing ten football pitches [of forest] every hour.”

Ten football pitches – Lesein knows very well how much that is. Because above all, he is a passionate football player. He plays for Ligi Ndogo, a football club in his hometown of Nairobi, the capital of Kenya. And it was the combination of his passion for sports and his environmental awareness that gave him an ingenious idea: he decided that for every goal he would score, he would plant one tree. He would fight deforestation one tree, and one goal, at a time.

“No matter how big the problem is, I just needed to make a difference,” he says. And so, in honor of his hero Wangari Maathai, who died in 2011, Lesein founded the organization, Trees4Goals.

Every week Lesein would go to football practice and train with his teammates. When he came home, he would note down how many goals he had scored in a little book. The next week, he would buy a little tree from a roadside store; then he would head out and plant it in a school, park, or forest.

“The problem is that people are not replanting,” he explains. And the consequences of this are deforestation and air pollution. “Trees take in polluted air,” he says. “Planting trees is really important to reverse climate change.” That is why Lesein set himself a clear goal: he wants forests to grow back to cover more than 10 percent of Kenya.

For Lesein, fighting against climate change means fighting for the survival of his community. Last year, mudslides devastated Northwestern Kenya after a rainy season that was much heavier than usual. “There have also been droughts,

and because of that, we have less food,” he says. “So there are farmers who are in real trouble, who aren’t able to grow their crops.”

After a while, Lesein realized that he needed to do even more. “I decided to increase my commitment. So for every goal I score, I decided to plant *ten* trees.” Soon, the people around him took note of his efforts. His teammates joined in planting the trees. Then his school’s rugby team wanted to participate. And when one of his friends asked if he could do the same thing, only for basketball, “I told him of course he can!” Lesein says. So now, there is also a Hoops4Trees group, joining with Trees4Goals in planting trees.

When a high school in South Africa invited Lesein to join forces, he began extending his work to other African countries. “As we expand, I make sure people learn from the experience,” he says. “And that they take home with them an appreciation for *why* we’re they’re doing this.”

For Lesein, making sure that people understand what is at stake is an important aspect of his activism. “Many people in my generation don’t know about what’s happening to our planet,” he says. “No one is teaching them; we’re not taught this in school.” Too often, he says, people feel that you need to be an activist or a scientist to understand what is driving climate change. With Trees4Goals, Lesein gets people involved and educates them at the same time. “For them to know what’s behind deforestation and pollution, and how we can reduce it by planting trees, that really keeps them interested,” he says.

Lesein is keen on getting as many people as possible to talk about the topic, and take action. Last year, together with his football club, he planted 600 trees in the Karura Forest, a park in Nairobi. In Ngong Forest he planted another 350 trees, together with his schoolmates. “We would finish one tree and move on to the next,” he says. “When we really got the hang of it, it was fun.”

Lesein feels that football, which is the most popular sport in the world, is a great way to educate people. “There are so many famous footballers who have a powerful influence on people,” he said. “With their large stadium audiences, they can influence thousands of others to go out and learn more about the problems, and create a very, very big awareness.” He has an ambitious goal to take his Trees4Goals campaign to the next level: he wants to get FIFA, the International Federation of Association Football, on board. “If this happens, there’ll really be a big difference on the topic of climate change,” he says. “There’ll be a large number of people that will then know about environmental conservation. It would be amazing!”

Over the last few years, Lesein has become an emblem of environmental activism in Kenya. He uses his social media channels on Instagram and Facebook to advertise his tree-planting projects. And last year he was invited to participate in the United Nations Climate Summit. “That was an amazing experience,” he says. It was the first time he had travelled outside of Kenya. He especially liked getting to know activists from all around the world at the conference. And he participated in a climate strike, where he heard Greta Thunberg address the crowd. Because he was wearing his Trees4Goals T-shirt, people came up to him and asked him about it. “I was happy to be able to share my story, and tell why I was doing it with great confidence,” he says.

When Lesein returned from his journey, he had a very special meeting on his schedule. President Uhuru Kenyatta had invited him to plant a tree at the State House, the official residence of the president of Kenya. “I was so excited,” he says. “I’m becoming friends with the president!”

But, as the story of Lesein shows, you don’t need to be the friend of a president to make a change. “I’ve learned that no action is too small,” he says. “Everything counts, no matter how small it is.”

Lesein says it is his generation that will have to pay for the poor choices of previous ones. He believes that young people need to be at the frontline of the discussions about climate change, in order to prevent previous mistakes from being repeated. “We have our voices, we have the numbers, we literally control social media,” he says.

When times get tough, Lesein thinks back to his childhood. He remembers the story of the hummingbird, and the work of Wangari Maathai. “We must take any action that is possible, because every action counts,” he says. “And we should just start. Even if it is something small; just like the hummingbird did.”

It's the little things citizens do. That's what will make the difference.

Wangari Maathai

Call to Action: By planting trees we can fight against the effects of climate change. Are you in a football club? Basketball? Hockey? Plant a tree for every goal or point that you score. Follow Lesein on Instagram (@trees4goals) and Twitter ([@Trees4Goals_Ke](#)).

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