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Do you know what Earth Day is? Or where it came from?

The idea for Earth Day came from a person named Gaylord Nelson. He wanted to have a day to learn about the environment (en-vi-ron-ment).

To him, the environment was everyone and everything on Earth. During his life he worked hard to protect the environment and to make it better.

Photo credit: Fritz Albert. Wisconsin Historical Society. WHi-117862.

Gaylord Nelson (1916 - 2005)
Gaylord Nelson was born on June 4, 1916, in Clear Lake, Wisconsin. He had two older sisters named Janet and Margaret. He also had a younger brother named Stannard. They liked to swim, sled, skate, and explore with friends. Gaylord liked being outside more than studying. He still did well in school.

Gaylord’s mother was a nurse. She also taught him about nature. Gaylord’s father was a doctor. He sometimes brought Gaylord along on house calls.

Wisconsin Historical Society. WHi-110605.
Gaylord’s family was very active in politics. His parents took him to political meetings and speeches. He learned about Wisconsin politicians like the La Follettes. They spoke about ways to make people’s lives better. Gaylord decided he wanted to be like them.
After high school, Gaylord started college, then came home and got a job. He shoveled stone to help build roads. Later, Gaylord left Wisconsin to attend college in California.

After that he went to law school. He kept thinking about becoming a politician.

Gaylord graduated from San Jose State College in 1939. Here he is at his college graduation with his mother.
When World War II started he went into the United States Army. While in the Army, he met a nurse named Carrie Lee Dotson. Years later they married and had three children: Gaylord Jr., Cynthia (“Tia”), and Jeffrey.

After the war, Gaylord came home to Wisconsin. He decided to run for the Wisconsin State Senate. He wasn’t elected the first time he ran. That didn’t stop him. A few years later he ran again and was elected.
Gaylord served in the State Senate for ten years. He served as governor of Wisconsin for four years. During those years he worked hard to make people’s lives better and fought for equal rights for all people. He also worked to protect natural resources. For Gaylord, it was all connected.

It was important to him that people have places to enjoy nature. He took steps to make that happen. It was good, but there was much more to do.

He ran for a seat in the United States Senate. Once he was elected, his family moved to Washington, DC.
He brought his mission to protect the environment with him too. But it wasn’t easy. He got the president to go on a conservation (kon-ser-vay-shun) tour of the nation. On the tour, people wanted to talk about other issues besides the environment. The tour didn’t help as much as Gaylord hoped it would.

He worked on bills to ban harmful substances, but they were not passed. He kept trying. He needed a different way to reach people. But how? He didn’t know then, but later he would have an idea.

In 1969 there was a massive oil spill off the coast of California. Gaylord went to see the damage and was very upset. Afterwards he read a magazine article about teach-ins at colleges. The teach-ins were about the Vietnam War.

That gave him the idea to have teach-ins on the environment.
Gaylord wanted all the teach-ins to happen on the same day. That way people would pay attention and have to act. The day he picked was April 22, 1970.

He worked hard to share the idea. But he didn’t tell people what to do. He let them make their own plans. Then the day got a name: Earth Day. On April 22 people across the country took part in grassroots events. They held marches, did clean-up projects, and much more. Earth Day was a huge success!

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More to Do

After the first Earth Day more people knew and cared about the environment. They wanted to take action. Gaylord and fellow lawmakers passed laws to stop air pollution and water pollution. New groups formed to protect the earth.

Students Taking Action: Then and Now

Even before the first Earth Day, students around the country had started to think about the environment and do things to protect it. That interest and activism continued to grow.

Recently students have held strikes and marches to demand major changes to save our planet. Have you learned about student eco-activists from the news?

People gathered for the Earth Day march on April 21, 1970.

A sign from the San Francisco Youth Climate Strike on March 15, 2019

Modified from Wikimedia Commons “San Francisco Youth Climate Strike - March 15, 2019 - 26.jpg” by Intothewoods7 / CC BY-SA (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0).

Photo credit: Bruce Fritz/The Capital Times. Wisconsin Historical Society. WHi-48104.
Gaylord left the Senate in 1980, but he didn’t stop working. He became the counselor of The Wilderness Society. He led efforts to protect lands, waters, and more. He passed away in 2005, but his impact is still felt. Now more than ever we need to care for the earth. How will you help?

Gaylord Nelson sitting near the St. Croix River. This photo was taken in 1967.

Wisconsin Historical Society. WHi-93130.
activism (n): ............ work done to change an issue or cause

bill (n): ................. a proposed law; if legislators vote to pass a bill then it becomes a law

conservation (n): ...... to care for and protect nature

elect (v): ............... to choose for a job by voting

environment (n): ...... the world of living and nonliving things

grassroots (adj): ........ when citizens (or those who are not in leadership positions in a community or group) work together

natural resource (n): ... material found in nature that is useful to humans

politics (n): ............. ways that people living in groups make decisions, usually using laws and rules

senate (n): .............. a group of people elected to government who make rules or laws; states can have a senate and the United States has a senate

teach-in (n): ............. a gathering (often on a college campus) with talks or activities intended to raise awareness of an issue