GAYLORD NELSON
A Vision for the Earth
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On many calendars, April 22 is labeled “Earth Day.” Do you know what Earth Day is? Or where it came from?

The idea for Earth Day came from a Wisconsinite named Gaylord Nelson. He wanted to set aside a day for people to learn about the environment. He shared his idea with people and it grew into Earth Day.

The environment meant a great deal to Gaylord Nelson. It included fields, rivers, lakes, parks, neighborhoods, cities, and so much more. It included everyone and everything on Earth. During his lifetime Gaylord dedicated his career to caring for the environment and protecting it.

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

Gaylord Nelson (1916 - 2005)
Gaylord Anton Nelson was born on June 4, 1916, in Clear Lake, Wisconsin. He had two older sisters named Janet and Margaret and a younger brother named Stannard. He loved to play outside with his siblings and friends. Together they swam, sledded, skied, skated, and explored as much as they could. Gaylord preferred spending time outdoors to studying, but he still did well in school.

Gaylord’s father was a country doctor and was always helping people. Sometimes he brought Gaylord with him to see patients. Everyone in the community knew their family.

A postcard from 1910 showing South Clear Lake. Gaylord’s childhood home was in Clear Lake, Wisconsin.
Gaylord’s family was very active in politics. Starting when he was in elementary school, Gaylord would go to political meetings and speeches with his parents. He idolized Wisconsin politicians like the La Follettes. When they spoke about solving problems and making people’s lives better, Gaylord decided he wanted to be like them. He started to think about what a future career in politics and government could be like.

Robert M. La Follette Sr. spoke from the back of a train while running for governor in 1900. La Follette and his sons were some of the politicians Gaylord Nelson looked up to.
After high school, Gaylord gave college a try, but stopped and found work shoveling stone for community projects like new roads and sewers. He then decided he wanted to continue his education. Gaylord left Wisconsin to go to college in California. Upon graduating, he returned to his home state and went to law school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He got involved in politics on campus and kept thinking about a future for himself in politics and government.

Wisconsin Historical Society. WHi-5904.

Gaylord graduated from San Jose State College in 1939. Here he is at his college graduation with his mother.
After law school, he served in the United States Army during World War II. While in the Army, he met a nurse named Carrie Lee Dotson. A few years later they met again and stayed in touch. Later they married and had three children: Gaylord Jr., Cynthia (“Tia”), and Jeffrey.

When Gaylord returned to Wisconsin after the war, he wanted to start his career in public office. He ran for Wisconsin State Senate. His first campaign ended in defeat, but he didn’t let that stop him. A few years later he ran again and was elected.

Gaylord went into the Army in 1942. He did training to be an x-ray technician and was made a first lieutenant. He led a company of Black soldiers and saw the discrimination that his soldiers experienced.
Gaylord served ten years in the State Senate and four years as governor of Wisconsin. During those years he worked hard to reform the government so people could trust it. He fought for equal rights for all people and to protect natural resources because he knew that all places, people, and other living things were connected. It was important to care for all of them.

He also wanted people to have places to go to spend time outside and enjoy nature, so he took steps to make that happen with his Outdoor Recreation Action Program. Although many good things were happening, there was much more to do.

To make an even bigger impact, Gaylord ran for a seat in the United States Senate, representing Wisconsin. Once elected, he moved his family to Washington, DC. He brought his mission to do more for the environment with him. But it wasn’t easy.

Gaylord Nelson was elected to the Wisconsin State Senate in 1948.

Photo courtesy of Tia Nelson.
He proposed **bills** to ban harmful substances, but they were not supported by many others. He persuaded the president to go on a national **conservation** tour, but it didn’t accomplish what he’d hoped it would. Gaylord felt frustrated, but he didn’t give up. He needed a different way to get through to people. He didn’t know just what that was, but years later he would come up with an idea.

In 1969 he went to see the damage that had been done by a massive oil spill off the coast of Santa Barbara, California. He was very troubled by the slick oil he saw coating plants and animals all along the shore. On the plane afterward, Gaylord read an article in a magazine, and what he read got him thinking.

The article described how college students were holding **teach-ins** about the Vietnam War. The teach-ins were meant to make people more aware of what was going on in the war. What if there were teach-ins about the environment? If more people learned about the environment, they would help protect it! During a speech he gave in the fall of 1969, he told a crowd about this idea and soon it began to grow.

Gaylord went on a conservation tour with President Kennedy in 1963. In this photo President Kennedy is on the left, and Gaylord Nelson is on the right.
A Day for the Environment

Gaylord thought that all of the teach-ins should happen on the same day. If they did, they couldn’t be ignored. People, including those in government, would take notice and be compelled to act. The day he selected for the teach-ins was April 22, 1970.

He worked tirelessly to share the idea, but he was also careful not to tell people what to do. He insisted that they make their own plans and decide what issues were important to them to teach and learn about and that contributed to the day’s popularity. As the idea spread, the day also got a name: Earth Day. On the first Earth Day, people all across the country participated in grassroots events, including marches, speeches and community clean-up projects. It was far more successful than Gaylord could have hoped it would be.

Wisconsin Historical Society. WHi-57066.
After that day, momentum kept building. More people than ever became aware of problems that affected the environment, and more of those people got involved in efforts to help. Gaylord and his fellow lawmakers passed anti-pollution laws to make sure there would be clean air and water. During this time new groups formed to pursue changes in their communities and in politics to care for 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?

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“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.

People gathered for the Earth Day march on April 21, 1970. A sign from the San Francisco Youth Climate Strike on March 15, 2019
Gaylord left the Senate in 1980, but he continued to be an advocate for the causes he believed in. He became the counselor of The Wilderness Society and led efforts to protect lands, waters, animals, and much more. He passed away in 2005, but his legacy lives on. Now more than ever before, we have to stand up for the earth and be good stewards of the environment so our home will continue to be here for us and future generations. How will you help?
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