

A CHANGING CLIMATE

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When Khlaire Parré '74 and Sr. Cecile Leclerc, p.m. '73/'79G ran into each other at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in Kenya last fall, they realized they shared more than a drive to reduce global warming.



Khlaire Parré and Sr. Cecile Leclerc, p.m. connected at a press conference at the UN Climate Change Conference in Nairobi, Kenya.

“My habit made me stand out,” says Sr. Cecile. “She noticed my pin and recognized me as a Sister of the Presentation of Mary.” When the two women spoke, they discovered both had ties to Rivier.

“To realize she wasn’t just a member of the same order, but that we had a direct connection through Rivier was extremely exciting,” says Khlaire. With over 6,000 people at the two-week convention and hundreds of different workshops to choose from daily, it’s amazing the two women ran into each other at a press conference.

But by the time each woman left Nairobi, the amazing was on its way to commonplace.

Khlaire’s Journey

Khlaire started her studies at Rivier as a biology major, but later switched to medical technology. After she graduated, she worked in a chemistry lab, then migrated to information technology. Today, she works as an IT consultant for Keane, Inc. “I wanted to get back to my first love—biology and the environment,” she says.

The spark came when Khlaire visited India in 1998. “I was appalled. I couldn’t breathe. The cities burn diesel fuel, and the air stuck in my throat,” she says. Cars and cabs shared streets with bicycles, pedestrians, and cattle. People walking along the streets had handkerchiefs over their mouths, and Khlaire learned that respiratory diseases top India’s list of causes of death.

“That got me motivated and studying,” Khlaire says. She discovered that, I’m too busy, and, the problem is too big—I can’t solve it, are the most pervasive myths about global warming. “If I’m going to buy a light bulb or an appliance, why not buy an energy-efficient one? Everyone can turn off a light they’re not using,” she says.

Khlaire began giving talks about what people could do to reduce their energy use. She created sample letters urging representatives to pass legislation for renewable energy. She began working with the Sierra Club’s Cool Cities initiative, a drive to take the Kyoto Protocol to a city level after the U.S.

abandoned the agreement. Her efforts in Richmond, Va. worked—Mayor Wilder joined the pledge to reduce emissions.

When Khlaire installed a solar panel on her beach house at the Outer Banks in November 2005, city officials didn't know what to charge her for a permit. "I was the first one there to use solar energy," she says. She says she sends all her extra power back to the grid; with tax credits and the state's green power program, she makes 21 cents per kilowatt hour.

In May 2006, Khlaire started a Richmond chapter of the Chesapeake Climate Action Network. The group urges states to mandate levels of clean, renewable energy and to offer tax breaks as an incentive. Khlaire recognizes that her passion and energy may be daunting. "Not everyone has to get involved at this level," she says. "It doesn't take much to make a difference."

The International Climate Action Network allowed Khlaire to represent them at the conference; all participants must fall under the umbrella of a non-governmental organization, or NGO. The NGOs lobby ministers of the environment; they report on ministers' performances to their native countries; and they vote on the "Fossil of the Day," an award presented to countries who block progress in the negotiations.

Khlaire said she never thought she'd have the opportunity to go to Nairobi. "It was mind-boggling," she says. She went with the understanding that she'd be there to learn, and found herself helping lobby directly with different countries.

One of Khlaire's most exciting moments of the conference was meeting Wangari Mathaai, winner of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize. Mathaai started the Green Belt Movement, which encourages women to plant trees to preserve the environment and improve their quality of life. Today, GBM has helped women plant over 20 million trees, which help provide food and reduce erosion. "She started by planting one tree," says Khlaire. "Her work is another example of how we're all connected."

Sr. Cecile's Journey



Sr. Cecile with the flags of the many nations represented at the UN Climate Change Conference in Nairobi, Kenya.

Sr. Cecile earned her bachelor's and master's degrees in biology at Rivier and went on to teach science to students from kindergarten through college. In 1991, she returned to Rivier to work as a lab technician and considered starting a Ph.D. program. "I wasn't sure what was next for me," she says. "Though my background was in physiology, I didn't want to go that route—I was uncomfortable with genetic engineering and the lack of ethics in the field at the time," she says. Instead, she earned a master's in environmental education at Antioch New England Graduate School.

For her thesis, Sr. Cecile developed a program to teach students about land, air, and water. She piloted the program at Presentation of Mary Academy in Hudson, where she had taught high school. Now she teaches seventh and eighth grade science, with

environmental education integrated into her classes.

"Nairobi wasn't in my mind at all," Sr. Cecile says. But when a Maryknoll father asked for support from the Catholic church and called for other religious to join him at the conference, Sr. Cecile was one

of only 15 chosen, and one of only 4 women religious. “I was amazed that I was chosen,” she says. “I needed that support from the Church as well; I wanted to speak to other people in the Catholic church who are doing environmental work to see what they’re doing.”



Orphans at St. Nicholas Home for Children will be able to buy another cow with the money Sr. Cecile’s students raised for them.



The irrigation system at St. Nicholas Home for Children is just one example of sustainable development.

The members of Sr. Cecile’s group attended different conference sessions each day; every night over meals they shared what they had learned with each other. The group gave the apostolic nuncio a message for the Pope, encouraging him to address climate change as a factor in poverty in developing countries.

“Attending the conference was a life-changing experience,” says Sr. Cecile. “We have so much and the people in Nairobi have so little—it doesn’t seem right.”

When Sr. Cecile’s students learned she was going to the conference, they started a project of their own. Through a bake sale, they raised \$500 to give to an orphanage in Nairobi. The AIDS crisis has hit hard; the city has 24 orphanages and nearly 80 percent of the people live in poverty.

Sr. Cecile found the St. Nicholas Home for Children, an orphanage run by an Anglican minister. “My students wanted the orphanage to use the money to buy a cow,” says Sr. Cecile. “The head of the orphanage agreed—they already have one cow, with another, they will be able to sell milk.” The 200 orphans care for chickens and a garden they irrigate themselves—sustainable development is a priority.

The Nairobi Negotiations

The UN Climate Change Conference in Nairobi made progress. Participants reached agreement on how to manage the exchange of tradable emissions credits, which allow industrialized nations to help developing countries invest in sustainable energy. Rules were finalized for the Special Climate Change Fund, which finances projects that help developing countries reduce dependence on fossil fuels. The 166 Parties to the Kyoto Protocol developed a work plan for agreeing on post-2012 emissions targets.

Though a great deal was accomplished at the conference, many countries are frustrated by the U.S.’s lack of involvement. Both Khlaire and Sr. Cecile say that other countries look to us as an example. “We’ve always been a world leader and in this issue, we’re lagging behind,” says Sr. Cecile.

“People from poor countries ask why the richest country in the world won’t help.” Khlaire says China and Japan ask why they should commit to meeting emissions targets when the U.S. won’t.

Despite their frustration, both women say positive things are happening in the U.S. at a grassroots level. Currently 20 states and the District of Columbia have renewable portfolio standards (RPS) in place; RPS policies require electricity providers to produce a certain level of power from renewable energy resources. More than 350 mayors have joined the Cool Cities program. Students at schools around the country are working to bring renewable energy to their campuses as part of the Campus Climate Challenge.

“Young people are taking action,” says Sr. Cecile. She said that many universities are focused on the problem of global warming, exploring sustainable methods of farming and producing energy.

“Biology teaches us that if you use resources wisely, they are renewable. We have plenty of resources in our planet—we can make this change,” says Khlaire.■



The group Sr. Cecile attended the conference with, pictured with Wangari Mathaai (*Standing, third from left.*) “She had to hide from the government at one point,” says Sr. Cecile. “The Sister next to her helped keep her safe.”

KEY TO THE CLIMATE CHANGE NEGOTIATIONS

Climate change negotiations are complex—many nations are involved, and it can take years to reach an agreement on how to proceed. Here’s a brief history and an overview of the process.

- Nations work together to develop a **convention**, “a broad statement of principles and objectives without binding targets.”¹ Governments sign an agreement to a convention, which then must be ratified by their domestic legislatures and parliaments. Once a certain number of countries have agreed to participate, the convention enters into force.
- A **protocol** translates the ideas set forth in the convention into a binding legal agreement with specific goals. Countries who ratify the protocol voluntarily agree to meet its terms.
- The largest summit of heads of government in history convened in 1991 and approved the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which entered into force in 1994. The Convention’s ultimate objective is to stop the buildup of greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere before they reach levels that will irreversibly change our climate.
- In 1997, the Kyoto Protocol established targets for countries to reach in reducing their greenhouse gas emissions. The United States signed the protocol, with a target of reducing greenhouse gas levels to 7% below our 1990 levels by 2012.
- In 2001, President George W. Bush announced that the U.S. would not ratify the Kyoto Protocol and pulled out of the agreement. Other nations continued negotiations and the Kyoto Protocol entered into force in February 2005.
- Parties to the UNFCCC and the Kyoto Protocol meet annually, working together to set new targets for emissions reductions, extending to 2020 and beyond.

¹Sierra Club of Canada. “A Planetary Citizen’s Guide to the Global Climate Negotiations COP 12—Nairobi.” 2.

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