

SUZY COULTER AND OTHER NURSES WORKING ON THE DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE ARE RAISING SUNFLOWERS AND DONATIONS FOR WOMEN IN AFRICA

Growing hope for Africa

When Vancouver community nurse Suzy Coulter returned from volunteering in Kenya earlier this year, she knew she had to do something to help the countless people she had met with HIV/AIDS.

She eventually decided to grow and sell sunflower seedlings, with all of the proceeds from their sale going to the Society for Women and AIDS in Kenya. Coulter, who is an avid gardener, was introduced to SWAK during the four months she spent with the US Center for Disease Control in Kisumu, a large city located on the shores of Lake Victoria.

“Kisumu,” she says, “is in the province with the highest rate of HIV/AIDS – 15 per cent – in Kenya.” During the trip Coulter met a Kenyan woman living with HIV. Her husband had recently died, making her one of Africa’s millions of HIV positive widows.

While coping with her own illness she grows sunflowers to help support herself and her children.

In Vancouver, Coulter works at the Downtown Community Health Centre with the Maximally Assisted Therapy program. It offers primary health care and information for people living with HIV on the Downtown Eastside.

When her friends and colleagues learned of her plans to raise money for SWAK, 12 of them eagerly volunteered to help grow and sell the sunflowers. Nurses involved in the project include Downtown Eastside TB nurse Jerry Cyr, NAOMI Project nurse Steve Kain and street nurses Fiona Gold, Liz James and Yasmin Winsor.

“So many nurses who work in this neighbourhood are tuned into what’s happening in Africa and they have a real sense of compassion for the people and what they must deal with.”

The nurses began growing the seedlings this spring in their homes, on window sills at work and at Coulter’s parents’ greenhouse near Chilliwack.



HELPING HANDS Vancouver nurses, from right, Yasmin Winsor, Liz James and Suzy Coulter, sold sunflowers to help Kenyan women with HIV/AIDS.

The nurses began growing the seedlings this spring in their homes, on window sills at work and at Coulter’s parents’ greenhouse near Chilliwack. They sold the young sunflowers over four weekends in May. “Everyone loves sunflowers,” says Coulter, “they’re popular, cheerful and a symbol of hope.”

The community’s response was terrific. Coulter eventually raised \$2,700. Every single cent was sent directly to SWAK, which will spend the money helping women deal with the effects of HIV/AIDS. The training they offer includes how to: provide home-based care, look for signs of TB and infections, explain women’s legal rights around inheritance issues and create memory books for children whose parents have died.

“I met a lot of amazing people and community groups while I was there, but SWAK’s work really stood out,” she says.

Coulter hopes to repeat the sunflower seedling sale next year – and she wants to raise even more money for SWAK by getting other people involved. If you want to help, contact Suzy Coulter at suzc@telus.net. □