

Movers & shakers

Mary Murphy

BY JANET WILSON, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN NOVEMBER 21, 2009 4:14 AM



Photograph by: Wayne Cuddington, The Ottawa Citizen, The Ottawa Citizen

For Mary Murphy, making a difference in the world can be as simple as stringing pearls along a stretchy elastic.

The founder of Pearls for Girls (www.pearls4girls.org) says her bracelets, necklaces and earrings are a present that keeps on giving.

Murphy began "pearl bees" as a way to help girls in developed and developing countries. The idea is to gather teen girls to make bracelets to raise money to support girls' leadership programs in Lesotho, a tiny country surrounded by South Africa, which has been ravaged by HIV/AIDS. According to UNICEF, one third of all children in Lesotho are AIDS orphans or vulnerable.

Murphy is an Ottawa mother of two, a leadership coach and an environmental consultant. She has travelled to China on numerous occasions and would stop in at the Hongqiao Market in Beijing to shop for pearls.

"I love pearls. I love their lustre and mystery. A friend recommended a contact at the market and I've been back several times."

Murphy has built a relationship with a couple who own the market stall and she now imports the freshwater, cultured pearls in bulk. The pearls come in white, pale pink and black.

"I wasn't well in 2006 and was at a tipping point in my life. I didn't know if I had cancer and wanted to leave a legacy. The idea and name Pearls for Girls literally popped into my head."

When her friend Peg Herbert, a former University of Ottawa professor, founded the non-governmental organization Help Lesotho (www.helplesotho.ca) five years ago, Murphy knew she had found her cause.

In June 2007, after getting a clean bill of health, Murphy began Pearls for Girls as a way to empower young women at home.

"I want girls to feel that they can contribute to something and for them to have the opportunity to be leaders."

Murphy says many people don't volunteer because they don't know how to get started. Her project has grown to Australia, the United States and throughout Canada. Since she started her fundraising efforts, Murphy estimates she has raised \$150,000.

Murphy spends three to four days a week on Pearls for Girls.

"I no longer have to contact organizations. Schools with leadership programs call me. It's a great event for Girls Guides and Brownies as they get a chance to practise what they are learning."

On Monday night, Murphy took her pearls to Carleton University, where 23 residence assistants took part in a pearl bee.

"They thought they'd make 50 bracelets but in two hours they made 116. No one stopped for a break and there were lots of laughs. Carleton purchased the bracelets for \$3,000. If this inspires just one person I'm happy."

To order the signature Pearls for Girls bracelet (\$27), necklace (\$12) or earrings (\$20), contact pearl@pearls4girls.org. All profits go directly to Help Lesotho leadership programs.

MARY'S MOTTO

My biggest accomplishment is inspiring girls to care about others.

I'd most like to meet Ottawa's Meagan McGrath, who has summited Mount Everest and is about to trek across Antarctica (www.sciencenorth.ca/meagan). I want to know about her dedication and all the training and what it was like to reach the top and look over the edge. What motivates and compels people like this? They are comfortable with the extreme.

I am inspired by giving and by big ideas that turn into surprises. I'm also inspired by nature. There's nothing like a walk on a beach or in the mountains.

My motto is where there's a will there's a way.

Next up is a visit by King Letsie III of Lesotho. We're thrilled that he's coming to celebrate Peg's Help Lesotho. He will attend an event at the University of Ottawa on Nov. 30 and Pearls for Girls will be there.

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