

Who's planting the seeds of HEALth?

MaryAnne Arcand is the coordinator of HEAL, an award-winning, B.C.-grown community health project. The project continues to bear the fruit of good planning, a practical approach, and endless enthusiasm.

SO OFTEN WE NORTHERNERS complain that the southern half of the province of B.C. gets all the “goodies” and has all the advantages. And most British Columbians, when they think of “growing,” envision sunny vineyards and orchards in the Okanagan, or verdant fields in the Fraser Valley, not small villages buried in snow from October to March. But one thing we have in the north is a “can-do” attitude. So what if it snows half the year? Plant a garden anyway!

So what if we live in small communities without a Starbucks or high-speed Internet access? We get together and communicate anyway! So what if we are spread over a geographic area the size of Texas? We're neighbours anyway!

It was in that spirit of defying the odds and pulling together to make things happen for ourselves that the Healthy Eating and Active Living (HEAL) project started. When Health Canada announced funding for diabetes Type II prevention in 2001, the community nutritionists throughout the north got together to write a very ambitious proposal to cover the whole region. Health stats in the northern health region are dismal when compared to the southern, more populated areas of the province, and we are at

higher risk for many chronic diseases, particularly diabetes. We also have the highest percentage of Aboriginal people (13% compared to the provincial 3%), who are at disproportionately high risk for diabetes and other diseases.

The plan was simple: let communities decide what they needed to combat Type II Diabetes, and give them some funding and support to do that. By making ‘seed’ money available, HEAL offered support and start-up funds for commu-

nity groups to move their own visions forward, nurture them and let them take root in the community's identity and culture.

A region-wide network was formed consisting of hugely diverse groups of people—farmers, organic

growers, nutritionists, educators, health professionals, early childhood educators, mental health workers, First Nations, administrators, government staff, social activists, restauranteurs, entrepreneurs, youth, food producers, retailers, wholesalers, food processors, and many more. Together they envisioned what healthy Northern B.C. communities could look like, and then did the groundwork in their own districts, getting buy-ins from local groups and individuals to willing to take on a Healthy Eating or Active

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Living project. Groups applied to HEAL for seed funding and got going. Initially, fifteen communities were involved in nineteen projects, with over 1100 participants. Projects that were funded were as diverse as the people and communities putting them together—Good Food Box programs, community gardens, community kitchens, trail development, development of food policies, and more.

Just as seeds planted in a garden yield many times over, so the initial investment of seed money from HEAL grew in each community. We estimate that for every dollar provided through the Health Canada funding, the communities generated four times that in matching funds and in-kind donations, making this model of “growth” a very good investment of health promotion dollars. A recent follow-up evaluation (December 2004) indicates that of the nineteen projects funded in 2001-02, fifteen are still operating in some form or other. Those communities took ownership of the project, and have been harvesting the results ever since.

HEAL is managed by a sixteen-member Advisory Committee from ten communities in partnership with the Northern Health Authority. The committee determined early that the project would be about building sustainable initiatives and community capacity. HEAL held nine development workshops in the first year alone. Annual gatherings brought project groups, the Advisory, and other interested folks together to share their work, get refreshed and inspired, teach skills, and continue building the vision.

Communication is key to keeping such a large

network going. More than 300 people subscribe to the HEAL newsletter, representing 45 communities and 189 organizations; twelve newsletters have been published to date. The HEAL website, www.healbc.ca, received more than 50,000 hits its first year, but now receives more than that every month. It has become a site for resources, ideas, and success stories. Descriptions of the projects and communities involved in HEAL are there, as well as our evaluation documents and learnings about what worked and what didn't. We have also produced a video based on our first four years' experiences, and a companion learning guide is in the works.

The HEAL model has been extremely successful, winning several awards, as well as being cited by B.C.'s Auditor General as a Diabetes Type II prevention model that should be replicated across the province, and mentioned by the federal Minister of State for Public Health, Hon. Carolyn Bennett, as a cost-effective, sensible, and successful approach to health promotion.

What's next? We plan to get involved in the Act Now! strategy of the province, which aims to ensure and increase access to of fruits and vegetables across British Columbia. And HEAL has taken on a new life, as the Northern BC Healthy Eating and Active Living Society—no longer just a project, but an entity and ideal that will go on planting the seeds of HEALth in the north for many seasons to come. ■

For more information on HEAL, go to www.healbc.ca or contact HEAL Coordinator MaryAnne Arcand at (250) 612-7086 or marcand@uniserve.com.