



MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER THE GAZETTE  
ble Coach award.

record as a coach,  
ple to his players  
ball is  
aver'

ade Ashton's 50th birthday last  
ar so much more of a celebration.

"To reach 50 was very special, and  
seball was a big part of that," Ash-  
n said. "A lot of people look at  
seball as a game, but for me, it's  
erally a life saver."

Ashton's presence as a coach does  
t come cheap, unfortunately. He  
timates it costs the N.D.G. Baseball  
ganization \$15,000 to \$20,000 a year  
tra to have him in the dugout  
rking orders at his players.

Parents hold fundraising events  
roughout the year to come up with  
e extra cash, and the reason they  
it is because they want their kids  
be exposed to Ashton's positive  
ergy all summer.

That's where the Most Valuable  
ach Award would be most felt,  
cause it comes with a \$25,000 prize  
the organization.

Ashton was nominated for the  
ard by one of his players, Alex  
rmel, and when he was told of it  
t he didn't think much of it.  
Then Ashton received a call last  
onth from TV sports broadcaster  
N, which is a partner in the award,  
tell him he was one of six finalists.

vote for **Carey Ashton** for the  
mpbell's Chunky Soup Most  
uable Coach Award, visit  
w.chunkymvc.ca. Voting closes  
arch 14 and the winner will be  
nounced on March 22.

## CULTIVATING, MARKETING MEDICINAL PLANTS

# Helping African farmers to help themselves

MICHELLE LALONDE  
THE GAZETTE

Carole Robert may not fit the stereotype of a humanitarian aid worker, but the Blainville entrepreneur has just won an international award for her program to help poor African farmers learn to sustainably cultivate and market medicinal plants.

Until just a few years ago, Robert was a prominent businesswoman running her own construction materials export company. She served as chairperson of the World Trade Centre of Montreal from 1996 to 2001, and was active with other prominent local business groups like Montréal International and the Montréal Board of Trade.

In 2003, Robert decided to put her career on hold to take a three-year MBA at HEC Montréal.

"That gave me time to take a step back and do some reflecting on my professional life, and to take a look at what was happening in the greater world around me," she said.

During her career as an exporter, Robert had become something of an expert in trading with partners in "difficult" countries. She realized there was great potential for commerce in some developing countries, but the people needed education and connections.

While doing her MBA, she learned about the flourishing global trade in medicinal, plant-based products that were coming into vogue for use in pharmaceuticals, cosmetics and foods. There was already a \$60-billion global market in these products in 2004, and that market was growing by about 10 per cent a year. Yet sub-Saharan Africa, where 43 per cent of the world's medicinal plants grow naturally, was only participating in 0.01 per cent of this market.

"Over the years with my export business, I had become convinced that international trade is the most powerful form of aid to developing countries. Humanitarian aid is, of course, necessary in big catastrophes, but trade is a more powerful tool under normal circumstances," she said.

Robert then launched a foundation called Biotechnology for Sustainable Development in Africa Foundation. BDA's first project is Plant Action, a three-year educational program in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This pilot project will train 30 farmers in sustainable planting and harvesting of medicinal plants and trees, and turn them into entrepreneurs. To participate in the program, the farmers must have access to arable land where they have the right to plant crops once they graduate.

"I believe developing countries will flourish through commerce, not charity. If we are always say-

ing, 'You are poor and I am rich, so I will give you charity,' we have this condescending relationship, and it doesn't work," she says.

In the first year, the "ecopreneurs-in-training," as Robert calls them, learn about sustainable cultivation practices in the industrial production of medicinal plants. The students will learn to grow plants such as moringa or neem trees to international standards of quality control. They will have access to a phytochemistry laboratory, built and financed by a local Jesuit group.

High-tech equipment for the lab is provided by BDA and its partners, which include Wyeth, Terre sans frontières, Algorithm Pharma, the Université de Montréal and the Roncalli International Foundation.

The second year consists of practical training in the equatorial forest and savanna of the Luki Man of the Biosphere Reserve, a 30,000-hectare conservation area managed by the World Wildlife Fund.

Students from the Université du Québec's École de technologie supérieure helped build a plant-processing centre in the reserve, which will serve as a prototype for other such centres that the BDA Foundation hopes to build across Congo, Robert said.

In the third year of the program, the students will return to their land to start their businesses. BDA will create funds for micro-credit so the ecopreneurs can hire employees. The foundation has raised and committed \$3 million to the program so far.

"Africans can exploit their own natural resources," Robert said, "but we wanted to help them embark on international trade in a responsible way, because that is essential. We wanted to show them how to protect these plants from over-exploitation so they can protect their resources for the future," and make a living at the same time, she said.

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GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

"International trade is the most powerful form of aid to developing countries," Carole Robert says.