

## Mairuth Sarsfield For Every Child a Tree

■ Mairuth Sarsfield, who says she has been “a dreamer all my life,” has despite that—carried through several practical as well as remarkable programs as a communicator. A graduate of McGill University and the Columbia School of Journalism, she helped plan the “People Tree” exhibit of the Canadian government at Expo '67 in her hometown of Montreal. She says of that extraordinary structure: “We wanted to tell the people of Canada what they were really like.... People walked through the leaves of the tree, so we had the leaves of the tree as the faces of people and, instead of the wind coming through, we had the murmur of Canadian tongues and voices: not only dialects and languages, but also Ottawa valley English [and] the Prairies way of saying the same things. So we were able to show the diversity of Canada in a way that seemed very pleasant to people.”

Mairuth joined the department of External Affairs as an information officer in 1971, and worked with the Canadian delegation to the United Nations during the early days of the Law of the Sea Conference. This led eventually to a four-year assignment in Nairobi as a senior information officer with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and to her outstanding work with their worldwide campaign in 1982, “For Every Child a Tree.” She explains:

“One of the big problems in Africa and Asia at that time was the creeping desert. They had done a lot of scholarly work, and in fact very solid research, on desertification. And UNEP had organized the Desertification Conference. I thought we had to reduce this ... to understandable levels. We were coming up to 1982, which was 10 years after the Stockholm Conference [on the Human Environment] where Canada took the lead and everyone was very much committed to the environment. In those 10 years, things had changed rapidly for the worse. It is true that there were environmental agencies in nearly every country, but there was also more spewing out of toxic chemicals and far more deforestation. The deserts were creeping rapidly, acid rain was killing lakes, and the sea was being ravaged without concern. We decided to try for a re-dedication in 1982.

“So we said, ‘Let’s see if we can’t bring in a spirit of caring.’ We used the word ‘management’ instead of ‘protecting,’ because we had to deal with the way people saw the environment. Most of the things we planned were in environmental education, but the magic for me was the program ‘For Every Child a Tree.’ I didn’t think it should only be governments organizing workers to plant masses of trees somewhere; it should be individuals putting in a single tree. That was the way to make it real.

“I also thought that, if you could get children to feel they were a tree, you might solve lots of problems. When you have so many refugees who had nowhere to put down their roots and were damaging the country and camps where they were; when you think of the black children in North America who feel alienated from their society; when you think of the children in India who were soon going to have to be nomads if there was no land for their parents to farm—there was a close connection between this rootlessness and our idea for a campaign.