



Brenda Fitzmaurice, a recovering drug addict who spent time in prison and on the streets of Vancouver, learned the art of flower design with Just Beginnings Flowers, a florist and floristry school located near Surrey Memorial Hospital. **PHOTO/**Sharon Doucette

Helping women grow with power of flowers

FLORAL DESIGN SCHOOL/ *Shop moves to Surrey from prison in Burnaby*

In her time, June Strandberg has seen some tough, prison-hardened women flower into some really creative people.

The Surreyite, 74, teaches the art of floral design through the society she founded, Just Beginnings Flowers, which has set up shop in the Phoenix Centre, near Surrey Memorial Hospital.

The shop's basement design school is where she works with single moms, women who have experienced violence in their lives, ex-prisoners and recovering drug addicts.

The program was brought to Surrey from Burnaby Correctional Centre for Women, which was closed by the provincial government in 2004. There, the Beginnings school and shop, as it was then known, was located at the back of the prison behind seven locked doors.

"When the facility closed," Strandberg explained, "I said, 'I gotta do something on the outside,' and that's why we're here. It's a perfect location for what we do."

With its training program, the society is making career options grow for people like Brenda Fitzmaurice, 33, a recovering drug addict and former prison inmate.

For nearly five years she lived on the streets of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, scrounging for the next hit of heroin or crack cocaine.

Today, she's clean and attempting to readjust to family life in Burnaby with her mother and two kids.

Just Beginnings has been a big help.

"I always thought of myself as a brown thumb," Fitzmaurice said with a laugh, "but when I came here, something clicked. June helped with that, and how she's worked with women with barriers to overcome, it felt right."

Tom ZILICH
Staff reporter

Fitzmaurice is still learning the finer points of flower design, but she's already good enough to earn some paid hours at the Just Beginnings shop – a crucial step for her as she searches for the right career path, with Strandberg's guidance.

Her goal is to one day open a flower shop of her own, and even involve her kids in the business.

"I can actually keep care of plants now," Fitzmaurice said enthusiastically. "I'm going to do my mom's garden, which is amazing considering where I was with this kind of thing."

It's the kind of story Strandberg loves to hear.

She's worked in the flower business for nearly six decades, starting in Alberta. As the years moved on, Strandberg grew interested in making a difference through social enterprise.

For more than a decade in Burnaby, the Beginnings program trained 160 women in floral design, with dozens of them sticking in the industry. Strandberg's work earned her a YWCA Woman of Distinction award in 2003.

Over the past few years, she nearly retired – but didn't. Instead, she moved to Surrey and worked to open another shop to help more at-risk women learn the craft of floral design.

"Because of her history," Fitzmaurice said, "it's comfortable working with June. My past is not a big deal with her and I really don't feel like I have to hide any of it."

Strandberg concurs.

"It's not about what happened yesterday with these women, it's about what road they're on today, it really is. They have to be in the right space and aimed in the right direction. That's how we help them."



JUNE STRANDBERG

Just Beginnings Flowers and School of Floral Design is located at 13686 94A Avenue and is open to the public. For store hours or more information, call 604-582-8298 or see the society's website at www.justbeginningsflowers.com.

Tips for home makeovers at Mackie library

This week in North Delta, Dana Smithers offers some trade secrets about doing one-day home makeovers – for living in, or selling.

Smithers, an interior redesigner, home decorator and stager, speaks Wednesday (April 30) at 7 p.m. at the George Mackie public library.

"Everyone has treasures and beautiful things in their homes," notes Smithers. "Most people just don't know how to decorate their homes so that it goes from ordinary to 'wow!'"

Smithers has appeared on *Breakfast Television*, CBC Radio and has written articles in home-decorating magazines.

The library is located at 8440 112th St. in Delta. To register for the event, call 604-594-8155.