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Non-profit women's floral school making bouquets for Olympic medal winners

By: James Keller, THE CANADIAN PRESS

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SURREY, B.C. - When winning Olympians from around the world take the stage next month to accept their medals at the Vancouver Winter Games, a small part of Cheryl Labun will be up there with them.

The 27-year-old is one of the floral designers, all from a non-profit women's floral design school in Surrey, tasked with making 1,800 bouquets to be handed over to winning athletes along with their medals at nightly victory ceremonies.

"I just think it's so cool that I get to be a part of that - when they're up on that podium and they're in that moment, they get to hang onto something beautiful," says Labun, who lives in Surrey with her husband.

"I'll be watching the ceremonies on TV and being like 'Oh look - I helped make those!'"

The bouquets themselves will be made up of hypericum berries, green spider mums and broad leaves, all arranged into an elegantly simple package that matches the gentle greens that are part of the official colours of the Games.

They'll be put together a day in advance by current and former students of Just Beginnings, a flower shop and floral design school in Surrey.

The school teaches the art of floral design to disadvantaged women who have suffered abuse, are recovering from addiction, have physical or mental disabilities, or others, like Labun, who are just looking for a change.

Labun is a past graduate of Just Beginnings' floral design course, which she found online as she was looking for alternatives to her previous office job.

She had been working from home and in flower shops since graduating, and eventually received a call from the school's founder, June Strandberg, asking if she

wanted to make the Olympic bouquets.

"I was like, 'Where do I sign up?'" says Labun. "You're part of something much bigger than yourself - it's the Olympics."

Strandberg, an energetic 75-year-old with silver hair and a keen eye for detail, has been in the flower business since she was a teenager.

She grew up around her family's greenhouses and flower shops in Calgary, and when she moved to B.C. with her husband in her early 20s, she soon found herself working for Grace McCarthy, a florist who would later become the province's deputy premier.

Eventually, Strandberg ran a program teaching women the trade at a women's prison in Burnaby, where she stayed for 15 years until the facility closed in 2004.

That's when she started Just Beginnings in the same building as the Phoenix Centre, a facility for women recovering from alcohol and drug addiction.

Strandberg says the six-week program gives the women a chance for a fresh start, whether they've gone through difficult times, have never worked before or are simply looking to change directions.

"Women from every walk of life can come here, and we try to put them to work when they leave here if we can," she says.


"It's great for all of these women to do this, and a great opportunity for some of them that have never had a job and are now working."

Strandberg partnered with another woman, Margitta Schulz, who runs a flower shop in North Vancouver, to bid for the right to make the official Olympic bouquet, and the winning design was selected last year.

"It's a wonderful thing," says Strandberg. "Like some of my women said, it's like getting a gold medal themselves because they're part of this. They're as close to the podium as they can get."

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