

# 'Women helping women'

For the metro's low-income and uninsured women, mammograms might be out of reach. But handmade African jewelry is helping bridge that gap.

BY VICTORIA D. WILLIAMS

It's finally happened. The best thing to hit shopping since layaway and one-day sales. Finally, women in Oklahoma have a legitimate reason to max out their Visas and MasterCards on jewelry. No more hiding Neiman Marcus and Harold's shopping bags behind the Christmas decorations, next to old pictures, in the back of the closet.

With Kazuri beads, there's no denying where the sales go. Just a swipe of a credit card and women in Oklahoma can accessorize their outfits, help fight the war against breast cancer and make the lives of women in Africa just a little better — without even breaking a sweat.

Thanks to Project Woman Coalition, the exotic African beads have traveled across the Atlantic Ocean to Oklahoma. All of the proceeds made in the Sooner State help the coalition continue offering vouchers for mammograms to low-income and uninsured women.

"We are delighted to have discovered them," said Pam Scott, executive director of the organization. "We're all about helping women, and the fact that we are helping woman way across the world really speaks to our mission."

Kazuri, Swahili for "small and beautiful," refers to entirely hand-crafted ceramic jewelry and pottery made by women in Nairobi, Kenya. The beads are designed to honor the Kenyan culture with their bright colors and creative patterns.

Created in 1975 by Lady Susan Wood, the Kazuri Beads Ltd. company is a member of the Fair Trade Federation and has more than 200 employees. Under the federation's rights, each employee is promised fair wages, an acceptable work environment and fair living conditions.

On this side of the globe, the Project Woman Coalition has been helping women since 1989. The not-for-profit organization began as a subcommittee of the American Cancer Society and became its own entity in 2000. The coalition is primarily funded through the Central Oklahoma Affiliate of the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation and the Avon Foundation.

Today, Project Woman Coalition serves more than 2,000 women each year, Scott said. That's only a step toward reaching the 19,000 women in the state who do not test themselves for breast cancer annually.

Scott and the Project Woman



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Coalition learned of Kazuri from bead enthusiast and entrepreneur Holly Conner.

Conner, 54, owner of Lake Vu Designs Ltd., donated some products for the coalition's largest fund-raiser, Ribbons & Roses. When she ran across the beads in a magazine, the two organizations seemed like a perfect match.

"This is an excellent way to visibly show your support for low-income women in Oklahoma and the women in Africa," Conner said. "We need to help citizens in our state, but we also need to be good citizens of the world."

For Conner, the beads are more than pretty fashion jewelry — they are a little piece of hope wrapped in ceramic and painted with care.

Conner was diagnosed with breast cancer five years ago. During a routine self-check, she discovered a lump in her breast, but when she went to the doctor, the original lump was gone and another was found. It was malignant.

After radiation, chemotherapy and two mastectomies, there is no evidence of



the disease in Conner's body. That doesn't mean she's necessarily "cancer free," though, she said, because with breast cancer, it's never really cured.

Still, after all she's been through, she said she can't imagine what the process would have been like if she didn't have the hope, courage or means to keep fighting.

"When I found a lump, I went to the doctor — there wasn't a thought (that I couldn't do that). The doctors told me to have surgery — there wasn't a thought," Conner said. "That's how we want women and men in Oklahoma to be living."

Conner describes Project Woman Coalition as "hope, because hope is the one thing you need during that time" and its services as critical to the state.

Breast cancer is the second most common cancer among women, preceded by skin cancer, Scott said. More than 10.1 million Americans today have experienced some form of the disease and 2,860 new cases of breast cancer will be diagnosed this year in Oklahoma.

"People are afraid of what they might find out so they won't test themselves," Scott said. "But we are making tremendous strides to educate women, and society really has come a long way."

The partnership between Project Woman Coalition and Kazuri is just one more way to help a female neighbor, friend or relative learn about breast cancer, or, in the words of Conner, of "women helping women around the world."

Conner and Project Woman Coalition officially will present the beads to the public at the Integris Women's Health Forum this week. However, Conner's already sold 30 pieces through private functions since July. The beads are important, but at each event, she stresses the importance of the coalition and breast cancer education.

Like cancer survivors, no bead is the same. They range in colors and shapes. Some are big and little. But in the end, they all have a message — one that will be remembered with each glance in the mirror.

"They're beautiful and amazingly fresh," Conner said. "And if we aren't going to have universal health care, then we need something." **OKG**