

Environmentalists says:

Women will make the difference

By JANET DUVAL

Special to the Independent/Free Press

Joan Cornfield came home from the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro last June frustrated. Frustrated at the complexity of the problems facing our planet, frustrated at the mindset of people back home, and frustrated to see governments doing "such dumb things."

So the former head of English at Erin District High School, with a doctorate from OISE (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education) sat down and wrote 47 letters to President George Bush.

"I call them the White House letters. My house is white too," she says. "They're very personal, coming out of my life, and addressing the environment." She's added a forward to Bill Clinton, and hopes the letters might be published as a small book.

Cornfield, formerly known as Joan Davison, spoke to the Canadian Federation of University Women, Georgetown, recently, one of many local groups which funded her trip to Rio as the delegate of the group POWER (Protect Our Water and Environmental Resources).

The Earth Summit was the greatest gathering of economic and political leaders in earth's history, she says. "I feel one of the blessed of the earth to have been there."

But there was little opportunity to see heads of state. Their conference was a one hour bus ride away from the Global Forum, which Joan and thousands of non-government delegates attended. At the Global Forum, delegates from around the world negotiated "alternative treaties" on desertification, women's issues, pollution of the oceans, and much more, inside 33 airy tents in Flamingo Park.

Our planet is in grave danger, she says. "If we don't change our ways, our perceptions, our habits, our children will inherit a dying planet."

But when you get into the environmental movement, "it's a jungle out there." The British Columbia forest industry, for example, had a booth at Rio defending clear-cutting of old growth forests. "Sure they're reforesting, but we're talking biomass here. A little seedling doesn't replace a giant tree."

"We have to disrupt people's lives to save the planet. What's more important, jobs or the environment? Jobs, or life itself?"

The question hit home just as forcibly at an open pit gold mine she visited, where mercury used to treat the gold is poisoning workers' children through the water supply. "How do you change social structures to give those poor people a healthy life?"

Brazil gets criticized for clear-cutting its rainforests, visible from the airplane as "little band-aids" in the jungle. "But environmentalists call Canada the Brazil of the North. We're a lot richer, so we don't have as much of an excuse."

"The pack of cards we've put our faith in will crumble," she says. "No one has the answer to all our environmental problems, but pretending they're not there is walking around in denial."

It's women, she believes, who are going to make a difference, to move in "with our different consciousness and perceptions, and bring the changes we need in the world." Never underestimate your own power to make change, she urged, mentioning the achievements of "mothers with a passion" who have forced changes on the world.

For the inevitable "What can we do?" question, she offered a list of actions she's drawn up. It's alright to start as a NIMBY ("not in my back yard"). Find one thing you can change at home or on the job, do it well, act collectively, and keep sane.

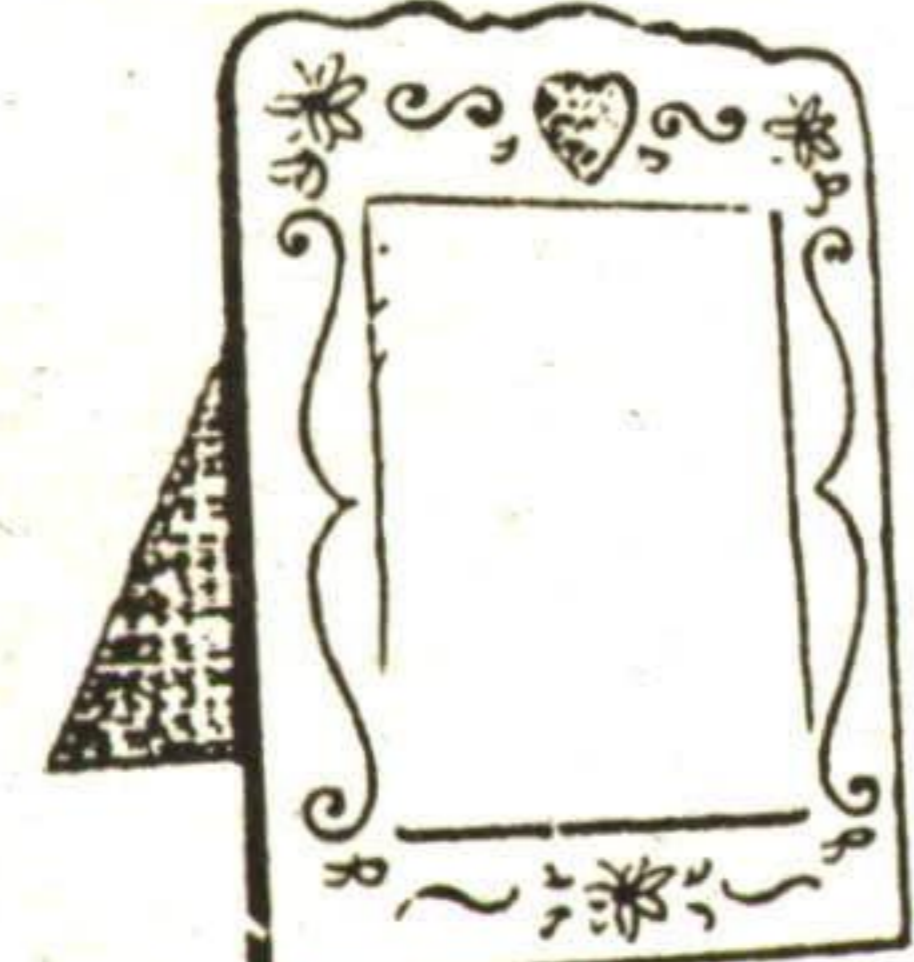
"I sense women stirring, questioning the whole fabric of our notions of how the world is run, looking at the hierarchy there. It's exciting to be part of that."

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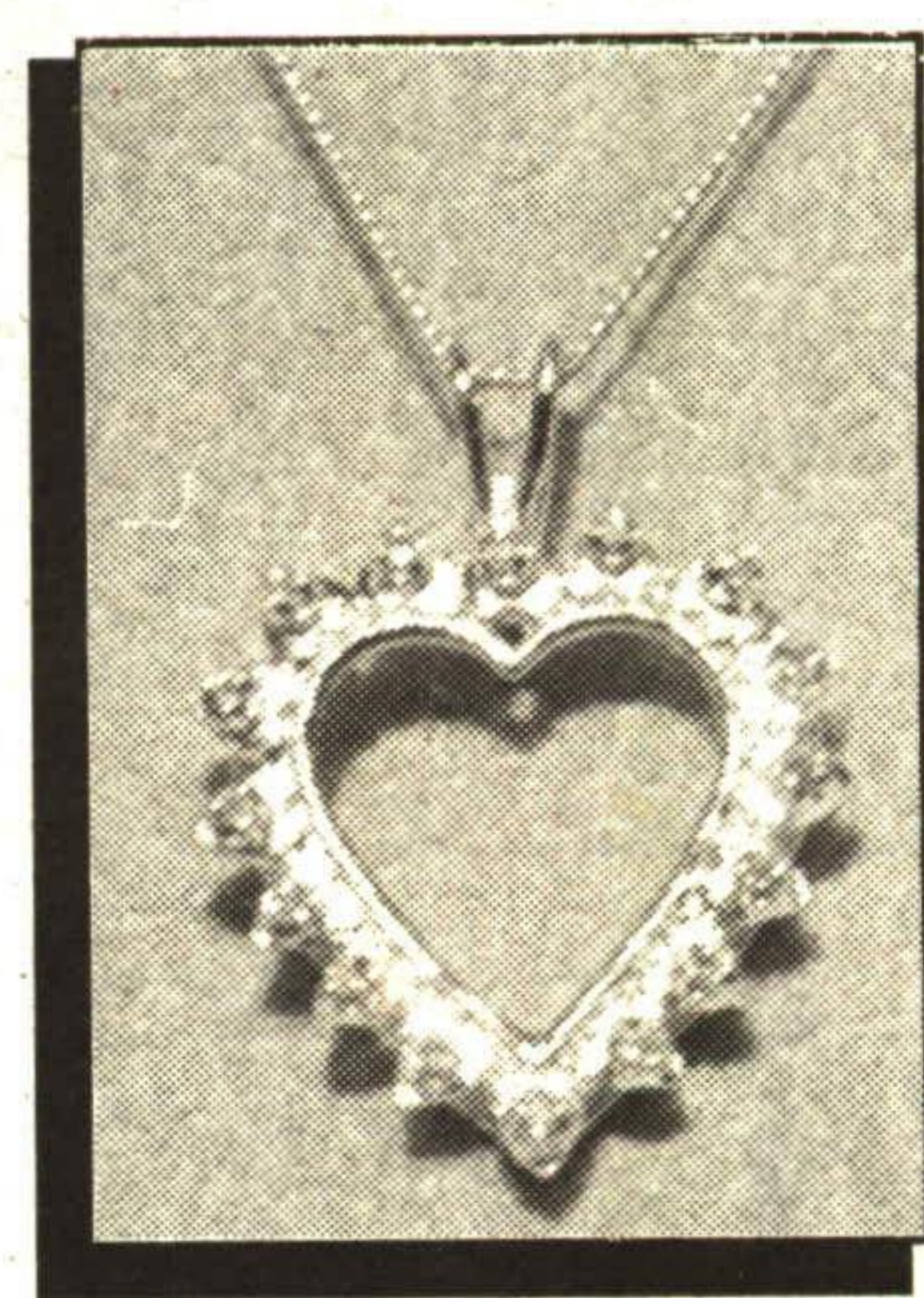
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