

# Sights, tastes and sounds of Africa

*Corn maze offers educational adventure*



## **Nathalie Gervais: Visitors will help fund school project.**

**NÔTRE-DAME-DE-L'ÎLE-PERROT** - Imagine being lost amid the tall corn for an hour, having to work your way through the maize maze by learning about life in Africa's poorest nations.

That's the theme of Nathalie Gervais's newest, most elaborate corn maze ever - and the first to harness the annual crowds of you-pick enthusiasts to a Third-World project.

Because Gervais's goal is to rebuild a school in Hangoumé, Togo, a small, impoverished west African nation where the average annual income is perhaps \$100 a year and life is a daily struggle to provide necessities, such as food and water.

Gervais, a single mother of three young children, has an abiding fascination with Africa. Trained as an ergotherapist at McGill, she earned a Master's in readaptation at the Université de Montréal before becoming a teacher. Seeking to widen her horizons, she took an eight-month course in international aid at the Centre de Formation en co-operative interculturelle in Rivière-du-Loup.

The four months she spent in Burkina Faso, Togo and Mali a decade ago proved to be a life-altering experience.

Four years ago, she took over the 15-acre Verger Labonté from the couple who started it, offering a range of products that attract a seasonal clientele to Ile Perrot's lakeside fruit and vegetable farms. Although Labonté has featured corn mazes in the past, Gervais turned an entire acre over to the concept. This year, the Labonté cornfields feature three mazes - the Chemin des bambins for the little kids, the 20-minute Chemin des tam-tams and the formidable La route d'Afrique, a one-hour educational adventure.

For \$5, visitors are treated to the sounds, tastes and sights of an African village - sun-parched land, masks, musical instruments, even a typical African hut, built by Lassine Traoré, who came to Quebec from Mali. There's ginger and hibiscus juice, farm animals, kids' treasure hunts, and of course the usual fall you-pick fare - apples, pumpkins, squashes. A dollar from every visitor goes toward refurbishing the decrepit Hangoumé schoolhouse.

When one reflects upon the fact that UNICEF can build an entire school for \$85,000, and the well that goes with it usually means that the womenfolk are spared the task of walking miles for water each day, it's not hard to understand Gervais's determination to turn her business into a moneymaker for African relief.

For more information, call Nathalie at Verger Labonté, at 514-453-5379.