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Giving a gift to help others

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NORTON - Late last year, with her November birthday and Christmas fast approaching, Kristine Kinra exactly what kind of present she wanted: a gift to others. She urged friends to send money set aside gifts to Women for Women International, an organization that helps women victimized by war.

Kinna said she first learned of the program on The Oprah Winfrey Show, and was impressed with the resourcefulness and determination of its founder, Zainab Salbi, who lived under Saddam Hussein's rule and experienced war firsthand.

"I've always wanted to donate to something like this, but I wanted to know where my money was going," she said.

Last year, Kinna's money was going to Zemira Barucija, a woman with two children from the war-ravaged nation of Bosnia. With a \$27 per month sponsorship, Kinna was able to exchange photographs and handwritten letters, and stay apprised of Barucija's progress in training programs designed to help her become self-sufficient. Now she is six months into her sponsorship with another woman, Merisda Kr

"It makes the world seem smaller when you realize that she is just a person like yourself who lives somewhere else and speaks a different language, yet wants the same things as we do ... to raise our children in peace," noted Kinna, who has two children of her own, Anna and Kori Sweeney.

She said her daughters have been influenced by the message of awareness made possible by the program. "My children get so excited every time we get a letter from these women," she explained. "They may always write back immediately."

They have also been influenced by Salbi's book, titled, "The Other Side of War: Women's Stories of Grief and Hope," which portrays the immense hardships faced by women in recent wars and their struggle to build back a productive life.

Kinna said her family came to appreciate the gravity of these hardships recently when their home was robbed. She explained that while sentimental items were among those stolen, she and her daughter were so grateful that no one was hurt, that they were all OK, and that is what really matters at the end of the day.

Above all however, Kinna stresses the importance of the work carried out by the organization, whose directors she met during an October conference in Boston. The directors and staff operate directly in war-torn countries, including Sudan, Rwanda and Kosovo, providing emotional and financial assistance.

The main goal of the program, however, is to train the women in locally relevant skills so that they can sustain themselves and their families. "All of us want to feel that we're taking care of ourselves and

families," Kinna said. "The whole point of this program is for women to become independent."

The Website of Women for Women International, which includes sponsorship and program details, is www.womenforwomen.org.