NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Work with LCWR led to advocacy to end human trafficking

Sr. Camille D'Arienzo | Oct. 29, 2013 Conversations with Sr. Camille

Sr. Camille: Kim, you and your red-jacketed associates at Nix Conference & Meeting Management are easily recognized at assemblies of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. How would you describe your service to that organization and to many others?

Kimberly Ritter: Nix is responsible for managing the meeting, conference and trade show. Corporations, associations, religious organizations, businesses and nonprofits have contracted Nix to help them with their budgets, venue selection, vendor selection, contracting, logistics or financial controls. We manage the structure of the event to your specifications, and we do it down to every detail. We are responsible for the full orchestration of the LCWR conference.

Our staff has helped clients plan successful events on four continents and in 17 countries. We can provide services from complete event backroom management to one or two specific services. At Nix, we pride ourselves on connecting with your national staff, board of directors and local host personnel. Our on-site expertise assures you that everything in the contracts is delivered as specified, allowing you to focus on program content, sponsorship, revenue streams, event promotion or attendee relations.

How long have you worked in this capacity with the LCWR?

I was hired by the founder of Nix, Mr. Richard Nix, in September 2004 and trained with the LCWR conference since 2005. I became the sole senior account manager for the conference in 2007.

During August's assembly in Orlando, Fla., you described the impact of this collaboration on your work and your life, especially with regard to your efforts to oppose the trafficking of women and children. Would you share that with our readers?

As I began to work for the women religious, my life began to change. I realized how powerful you could be as women and how effective you were when you communicated with love and compassion. I was constantly surrounded by strong, intelligent, loving women who allowed the Holy Spirit to move them into their decisions. What an amazing revelation that you can fully and freely give yourself to God and allow him to direct you. The U.S. Catholic sisters have made me a better woman, a better mother to my daughters, and have given me a new vision on allowing the Holy Spirit to lead my life.

From which religious community did you draw your inspiration?

I have been inspired by all of the orders of sisters that I encounter. I take a piece of each order's charism and live it to the best of my ability. However, it was the Federation of Sisters of St. Joseph that asked Nix to find a hotel that would sign the ECPAT-USA Code of Conduct to fight commercial sexual exploitation against children. Nix worked with the federation to encourage the Millennium Hotel St. Louis to sign the code of conduct. The sisters trusted me to assist them with this project, and my passion grew. The Sisters of St. Joseph will always have a special place in my heart, as they were the catalyst for where I am today.

Why does this issue matter so much to you?

When the Federation of SSJ mentioned sex trafficking, I did not imagine that it could happen in the U.S. I was shocked to learn that it was prevalent in all U.S. cities, even our hometown of St. Louis. At the time, my daughters were 12 and 13 years old. My children are the most important thing in my life. My love for them is like no love I could have ever imagined. Age 12-13 is the average age of entry into the sex trade for girls. Sex trafficking has no stereotype for the girls that enter. They are from the city, the county and rural areas. They are from every ethnic and every socioeconomic background. I realized that no girl was safe. My girls were educated in a private Catholic high school, but that did not mean that they were safe from a trafficker/pimp or a recruiter.

Honor God, help people. As Catholics, and as I want to teach my children, we are taught to help people. I believe all girls should have the opportunity to become strong, successful women and that no one should ever have to be sold for sex. It was the most horrific thing I had ever heard, and I knew I could not tolerate this atrocity. I began to research the issue, speak with local law enforcement and advocates. The media picked up on the fact that I was able to identify hotel brands from the photos I saw of girls for sale online. At that point, the Holy Spirit took over, and I had a voice. The simple meeting planner that had been influenced by the sisters and the love and protection of her children had a voice, and I was ready to do whatever the Spirit had intended.

What have you accomplished?

My accomplishments are not my own, as I share them with every sister that has touched my life and the owners of Nix Conference & Meeting Management, Molly Hackett and Jane Quinn. Without the support of these Nix principals, I would not have been able to accomplish so much.

My awards include the FBI Director's Community Leadership Award 2012, the 2013 Missouri Athletic Club's Women of Distinction, and the 2012 St. Louis Women of Achievement for Human Welfare Award. I was selected by *Successful Meetings* magazine as one of the 25 Most Influential People in the Meetings Industry in 2012.

My affiliations include vice president, board of directors for the Healing Action Network; advisory board member for ECAPT-USA; member-elect of the board of directors for Women of Achievement; and a member of the Religious Conference Management Association.

But the most important accomplishment is that I have had the opportunity to go on the streets and talk to the girls. I have had the opportunity to bring home a baby and her mother from the hospital who was just out of The Game. I have seen and been a part of victims becoming survivors. Those are my real accomplishments. The awards and affiliations are important in spreading the word and bringing awareness, but breaking the chains of sex trafficking is the most important thing.

How have you publicized this situation and ways of addressing it?

The publicity seems to come from the media. There is finally an interest in human trafficking. Sex trafficking is a little dirty and a little sexy, and that is what the media wants to talk about. It is taboo, but I am always ready

and willing to bring awareness to the issue.

How can interested individuals get involved?

Join us at the IGNITE Conference [1] in St. Louis March 2-4, 2014. We will engage, educate and empower all those supporters and stakeholders in the common cause of combating sex trafficking.

Where and with whom did you spend your childhood?

I grew up in St. Louis with an amazing mother and father. Church was always the center of our lives, and I am so thankful that God blessed me with such a wonderful family.

Who were your role models and influences?

I would say that my mother was the most influential person in my life. She made me work hard and she kept our family structured around God. Youth group and church were the core in our family. My mother was a wonderful example of a giving, loving woman who wanted the best for her children but was not afraid to make us work for what we wanted and abide by rules that would teach us to be responsible individuals.

Please say something about your family -- husband, children.

My life is blessed with support. Whether we have to take a Saturday to go move furniture into a survivor's new home or run in a 5K to raise money for an organization, my family is always there. (I keep my family life vague because of the traffickers that know who I am. Ritter is the name I use for the media, but it is not my real last name.)

What in your faith is most important to you?

My children are grown and in college now, so I find myself realizing -- pulled, really -- to fighting this atrocity. I have realized I am not in control of my life. I realize that the Holy Spirit has a job for me on this earth. So, I have faith that I am to follow this path as long as I can continue to influence those around me. So the most important thing to me right now is surrender. I am his vessel and I can't wait to see where he takes me next.

Do you have a favorite Scripture passage or Bible story?

YES! When I first started doing this, people thought I was crazy. I was talking to a Sister of Mercy, and I told her I had no idea what I was doing, but I knew I had to do it. She gave me Isaiah 43:19, and I have carried it with me for the last four years. I had no idea how true this verse would be: "Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert."

Does it make a difference in your life?

I see it. I see the way, a path now. Five years ago, people had no idea what sex trafficking was, but now, things have changed. It is on the news, it is in articles, and knowledge is more prevalent. I see the rivers of awareness beginning to flow. It is so amazing, and I know there is so much more to come to save these victims.

What does your faith offer you? Ask of you?

People always ask if I am scared because of what I am fighting. I go places on the streets and in the city I should not go, and I speak out. I am not afraid. This is my job on this earth, and I have faith that this is the life I am supposed to live. So my faith offers peace in all situations.

Is there anything in Catholicism you would change?

I am not going to answer this ... there are so many things pertaining to women that I would change, but I am going to skip this one.

How do you pray?

All day, every day. I talk to God all the time. Sometimes I just thank him; sometimes, I am asking him for the words to communicate the way he would want me to. God is awesome and he always answers in at just the right time.

What about your faith is most meaningful to you?

I think that my ability to *have* faith in the most desperate, horrific situations is so meaningful. I have seen and heard things the average person could not mentally or physically imagine. I had no idea people could do these things to another human being. But I continue to believe that God saves and that I have faith that we can all have an effect on trafficking.

Do you see it in action?

Yes. All of the time.

How do you relax?

I am a gardener and a cook. These have been great ways to bond with my kids over the years, and I continue to love both of these hobbies. My goal is to teach victims in services to bake and garden as well.

Do you have a favorite TV program?

No, I don't watch much TV.

Movie?

No, don't go to many movies

Author?

So many to choose from. I would say Kahlil Gibran for the beauty of his writing and Fitzgerald for all-time favorite books.

Food?

All food. Of course, my life is more complete with chocolate.

What causes you sorrow?

Knowing that when I go to sleep tonight, countless girls are going to be raped and tortured and that some man, some john, is going to pay money to inflict this treatment on another human being, especially a child. The degradation of our society causes me great sorrow.

What causes you joy?

Family. Just being with the kids, hanging out, laughing, cooking and loving one another. That is true joy.

What gives you hope?

People talking about trafficking. People asking me about trafficking. Articles and news stories about trafficking. This gives me hope that awareness is rising and that more people will join us in the fight to combat sex trafficking.

What do you want from our faith for your children?

Simple. I want my children to honor God and help people. I want them to teach this to their children. I want to create a legacy of family that works generation to generation to help those that are in need.

Is there something you wish I had asked?

Not that I can think of right now.

[Mercy Sr. Camille D'Arienzo, broadcaster and author, narrates *Stories of Forgiveness*, a book about people whose experiences have caused them to consider the possibilities of extending or accepting forgiveness. The audiobook, renamed *Forgiveness: Stories of Redemption*, is available [2] from Now You Know Media.]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Sr. Camille's column, Conversations with Sr. Camille, is posted. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert signup [3].

Source URL (retrieved on *07/23/2014 - 14:32*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/conversations-sr-camille/work-lcwr-led-advocacy-end-human-trafficking

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