

Fritschner makes connections with her story

By JACOB BIBA

Times-News Correspondent

In May, the Rev. Annie Fritschner — an independent fundraising trainer and motivational speaker — spoke at the Business & Professional Women's Luncheon at Kenmure Country Club in Flat Rock.

She warned the crowd: "I'm going to mention sex, drugs and rock n' roll. I'm going to talk about God, and politics and religion, and all those things that we're not supposed to do in polite society."

But she thought the time was right to share her story — a story marked by the pain of a violent and chaotic childhood — and what she found as a young child growing up in Kentucky that saved her life.

Those in attendance that day listened as Fritschner described how she, at an early age, became responsible for taking care of a mother battling alcoholism.

"By the age of 5, it became my job to take her from the dinner table when she was beginning to pass out on her plate and walk her upstairs, and tuck her into bed and kiss her good-night. And then to tell her that I loved her," Fritschner told the crowd.

She went on to describe her father, who would fill with rage and react violently to circumstances that he believed were out of his control.

"Day of report cards were the worst," she said. "Because he would take one of my school books and hit me on the head with it, as maybe I might get smarter if he would bang some sense into my head."

Though her childhood was overshadowed by violence and sadness, Fritschner found a lifeline.

'Volunteering saved my life'

At the age of 7, Fritschner began prepping food at her local soup kitchen. Soon she became a candy striper at a hospital and on Halloween was trick-or-treating for UNICEF.

As a volunteer, she experienced the encouragement of others and finally found value in her life. And it remained a constant ever since, though she would face hardship later.

Twenty years ago, Fritschner moved to Western North Carolina from Connecticut and had what she described as a nervous breakdown.

"I had my own business. I'd been on boards. I had a family, friends, everything. I moved here and knew three people — my husband, Vanessa Mintz and Larry Hogan," who were friends, Fritschner said. "I had no television, no Internet — I don't know



Annie Fritschner speaks with a friend after giving the keynote speech at the Business & Professional Women's Luncheon at Kenmure Country Club in Flat Rock on May 22.

if it had been invented by then — and all of the pain in my life was finally able to come to the surface since I had no distractions."

She was subsequently diagnosed with depression and a thyroid disease, which Fritschner explained as very helpful because she could finally get on anti-depressants.

"I admit I have a mental illness," she said. "I'm not ashamed of it."

Eventually, she was able to get out of bed. She enrolled in a class at Blue Ridge Community College, and then started working part-time. Soon she was employed full-time, got back into fundraising and was able to start her own business again, owing her success to the community.

"This community loved me till I could love myself — love myself back to wholeness," she said.

In 1986 she joined the Episcopal Church, becoming an active member. She would later meet a deacon in the church who explained the mission of the Order of the Deacons — acting as "a bridge between the church and the world," Fritschner said.

For Fritschner, something clicked.

"When that soulful moment happened, all the pieces fell into place and I went through discernment, entered the Diaconate school in the Diocese of

WNC and was ordained in 2002," she said.

An independent professional

Fritschner has always worked in the independent sector, where she said there are no stockholders to be held accountable to and where she acknowledged that it's OK to fail.

"This is where the work of humanity is going on. This is where people's lives are being saved," she said. "I've never wanted to be just a cog in a wheel. I've wanted to make a difference."

Her desire to help others extends overseas, as Fritschner is also very active with international causes. In mid-August, she will travel to Cuba to "explore creating companion relationships between First United Methodist Church and other faith communities in Cuba," she said.

Soon after she returns, Fritschner will be off to India, where she'll continue her work with girls and women who have been victims of human trafficking.

"We hope to inaugurate a new sewing center that will provide an economic income for vulnerable women who want to be trained in a certified sewing center," Fritschner said.

Once trained, the women will be able to cre-

"She makes everyone she comes in contact with better."

LOU REEVES,
commenting on best friend
Annie Fritschner

ate hearth scarves from Indian fabric and sari trim to be sold in the U.S. for home decoration.

Fritschner's friends and colleagues see the difference she is making. Cheryl Gettinger, director of fund development at Deerfield, quickly found a friend and mentor in Fritschner.

"She just took me under her wing and taught me how to be genuinely who I am while doing that type of work," Gettinger said.

"She finds a way to connect with pretty much

everybody. On some level she finds a way that she connects, whether it's people in India or someone who's going through a hard time, or a happy time, she gets right there with you."

Callie Walston, philanthropic coordinator at Four Seasons, also found a mentor in Fritschner.

"She welcomes everyone with a huge smile," Walston said. "So walking into a room being a younger businesswoman, and to a philanthropy room where everyone is a colleague and knows everyone so well, she'll introduce herself and then introduce you to every one of her friends."

Fritschner now works with Walston as a consultant with Four Seasons.

"She's more than a consultant, she's more than a friend of our agency, she's more than a donor and volunteer for our agency," Walston said. "When she

Annie Fritschner

HOMETOWN: Louisville, Ky.
OCCUPATION: Fundraising trainer and coach; motivational speaker; capital campaign consulting; minister of pastoral visitation at First United Methodist Church

FAMILY: Husband, Sam Fritschner; two step-children, Hannah and Aaron

CAUSES: Aims to make a better difference in the world around her, whatever the cause.

consults with somebody she really kind of takes everything about them and about the work that they're working for or with and makes it better."

"Everything in my career, ask me again in 10 years, I'll owe it all to her," Walston added.

In 2013, Fritschner received the Athena Award, recognizing her professional accomplishments, leadership abilities, community service and efforts to empower women to reach their goals. The award is presented in memory of Mintz, who brought the award to Henderson County before her death in February 2011.

Sharing her story

Though the list is long of people and organizations that have been touched by Fritschner, she hopes she'll reach even more by sharing her story.

"If we don't talk about it then we aren't going to know it's going on. If we don't know it's going on, we can't do anything about it," she said.

And her best friend, Lou Reeves, knows just what Fritschner is capable of achieving.

"She makes everyone she comes in contact with better. She listens, she pays attention and she just acts on whatever it compels her to do. She's just open to whatever there is she can make a difference to."

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