

CSW Delegates to Continue Work on Behalf of Girls

SSND delegates to the February 26-March 9, 2007 meeting of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) have been busy sharing what they learned about discrimination and violence against girls with audiences around the world.

Student Nadine Binder from the Brede School in Brakel, Westphalia, Germany writes about the many efforts that she and teacher Felizitas von Boeselager have begun.

“When I returned from New York, I gave a TV interview about my experience and sent a report to the appropriate government official from our region.

“During the last weeks, I have had the opportunity to give presentations about my experiences as an SSND delegate to the CSW to all of the classes at school and also in my church. It was amazing to see that as soon as I started to speak all the pupils were absolutely quiet until I ended and then pupils, as well as the teachers who were with them, started to cry when I told the stories of the girls I met. I am also preparing a presentation for a special evening at the end of May which will include information about my experience in New York and information on our new working group.

“At the moment, I’m working on a bilingual website in German and English which will provide information about our working group and also publish news from the other SSND Delegates who attended the CSW. The website should provide everyone who is interested in supporting us with information and at the same time be a platform for discussion and exchange of ideas and experiences.

“We have also started a SHALOM club which includes groups which are already working for peace and justice as well as our new working group on girls. We held our first official meeting of our working group and already have a list of 70 pupils who are interested in working together for girls. They have a lot of good ideas and I’m grateful for each of them, especially because my younger brother encouraged some boys to join us as well.

“Because there are so many pupils, we split the working group into three smaller groups according to age and next week, I’ll meet with the single groups to get to know everyone and to decide with them which name they want to have and which project they want to support. Already pupils from grade five to seven have decided to support the SSND kindergarten in Romania.

“Finally, faculty members Sister Maria-Theresia and Mr. Reker helped to organize our school’s participation in the 2007 Campaign for Education’s “Global Action Week” in support of the right of all children to quality education.

Caitlin Byrnes, a student at St. Saviour High School, Brooklyn, N.Y., sent a copy of the talk she delivered at her school’s Founder’s Day Liturgy on May 9. Her remarks are excerpted below.

“Everyday, at the United Nations, the eight girl delegates could attend any conferences or parallel events that we wished. At the end of each day, we participated in the Girls’ Caucus where we collaborated with about 50 girls, some from nations we’d never even heard of, in attempts to draft our own version of the Commission’s outcome document which we would present to the delegations of each of our home nations.

“The finding of just about every discussion was that the main way to end discrimination and to empower girls is education. This is clearly an idea that the School Sisters of Notre Dame understand. By pioneering schools for girls in places where none would have otherwise existed, the SSND have been empowering girls for many decades.

“For us, probably the most amazing part was getting the chance to meet all the different people that we did. We would walk through the halls of the United Nations and stop to talk to girls from places like Tanzania or Azerbaijan, countries that seemed so distant

before this experience. Each of us was granted the ability to see things from a global perspective. We can now see outside of our own country because knowing someone from another place makes things seem all that more real.

“From my time spent at this conference, I also learned to value my education much more. Many girls will never get the chance to attend school at all. Seeing other girls who are also products of a SSND education taught me the value of this aspect as well.”

In the note that accompanied the text of her speech Caitlin wrote, “You wouldn't believe the feedback I received from so many girls, everyone was really interested in what I had to say. In the coming months, continuing into next year, I will be working with my school's SEEK (Christian Service) Club on a few projects and fundraisers that are still in the works.”

Agnes Agyemang-Barnie, a student at Notre Dame Girls Senior Secondary School, Sunyani, Ghana, West Africa writes:

First, please let me thank you again for the wonderful opportunity given to me to attend the CSW meeting as a representative of the School Sisters of Notre Dame. It certainly has given my life a new focus.

“I have already had the opportunity to appear on three of the national television stations to tell about my experiences. One of the programs on women's issues is hosted by a woman I met at the United Nations, Ms. Mia Ansah Ampene.

“I was also interviewed by the national newspaper, the *Daily Graphic*, and used that opportunity to stress the importance of education for girls.

“I visited the Catholic Bishop of Sunyani to tell him of my experiences.

“There has also been time to talk to my school community, as well as to my peers, both male and female, about the need to eliminate discrimination and violence against the girl child. I have become aware that we possibly unknowingly contribute to this problem and we must be made aware.

“Two radio stations have invited me to talk about what I have to say to Ghana after attending this meeting and because I have had the experience of meeting young girls from all over the world one of the radio stations has asked me to join the Children's Channel programme whenever I am home in Accra on holiday.

“Finally, I plan to try to get an appointment with the Minister of Women and Children's Affairs the next time I am at home.”

Faculty member Juliane Bungartz of Theresia Gerhardinger Gymnasium, Munich, Bavaria, Germany, writes that she and student Stephanie Braun have found a variety ways to share their experience with their community and raise awareness about girls' issues.

“In March, Stephanie and I made a 'notice board' giving the most important information about the CSW meeting that we used for this year's “Information Day” at Theresia-Gerhardinger-Gymnasium – a day when students' parents can come to our school. We stood in front of the board and spoke to people in order to draw their attention to the topic of girls' rights. The notice board can still be seen in one of the hallways at our school.

“Stephanie has already given three presentations about our experiences at the United Nations, two presentations for all of our students and teachers, who were divided into two groups. The third presentation was for interested parents. She succeeded in pointing out the importance of girls' issues and has convinced quite a few students to join the SHALOM Club which we intend to establish at our school. Stephanie is also planning to give her presentation at other schools in Munich in order to raise awareness there, too.

“In addition, we have written a report for the yearbook of our school which will be published at the end of the school year.

“Stephanie has also given a radio and a TV interview in youth broadcasts of the main Bavarian radio and TV stations. In these interviews she spoke about her experiences at the UN. Two weeks ago she was invited to a radio talk show as a female youth representative. The topic of the discussion was ‘50 years of equality of men and women in the German constitution.’

“We are looking forward to Sr. Leonora Tucker’s visit. All of our students will attend her presentation about Agnes’ school, Notre Dame Girls Senior Secondary School in Ghana.

“We hope we can keep in touch with all the SSND delegates, so that we can plan things together.”

Linda Kennedy, teacher at Notre Dame High School in St. Louis, Mo., wrote an update on the activities that she and student Jamie St. Eve have been involved in since the CSW meeting.

“Jamie and I gave a presentation on our CSW experience at the U.N. for the whole student body. You could have heard a pin drop. All 400-plus girls and 60 faculty members seemed to be riveted as Jamie and I explained what we had learned. After the presentation, the girls were asked to write their comments and thoughts on large note cards. They wrote how they felt about what they had learned and how we, as a community, can be involved in helping with the plight of the “invisible” girl child in the world.

“We also gave a presentation to the School Sisters of Notre Dame at the Motherhouse. It was accepted with great enthusiasm and offers of ways to educate us further and also help with the cause. So things are progressing with plans to initiate different fund raisers, work with the SHALOM Club on various projects, etc. I do know that one of my goals is to help the school in Peru, where S. Yvonne Nosal, SSND, is teaching.

“It is our hope to branch out and extend this message to the Catholic community in general around the St. Louis area, by visiting other schools and other faith-based organizations.

“Jamie has been featured in several newspaper articles for her involvement with the CSW 51 and visit to the United Nations and hopefully this has brought about greater awareness also.”

S. Yvonne Nosal, SSND, who served as a translator for Vanessa de los Milagros Juárez Arévalo, from María Teresa de Jesús Technical High School, Tejedores, Piura, Peru, and her principal, S. Marleny Bardales Raymundo, a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur, wrote the about the following in an article for *News Links*, a publication for the sisters and associates of the Canadian Province:

“On our return to Peru, we were invited to the Congress to greet President Mercedes Cababillas, as well as to spend a little time with the congresswoman from Piura, Rosa María Gónzales.

“The challenge now is to share this experience with others here in Peru as Vanessa has done with the students and teachers at her high school and with the youth group, JUFASCA, which includes youth leaders from the village we serve in *Fe y Alegría*.

“We also need to struggle together to eliminate all forms of violence and discrimination against the girl child.”

Beth Huggins, who served on our SSND Leadership Team, offers the following reflections on how her experience as an SSND Delegate to the CSW connected to her subsequent travel to Guatemala.

“As a member of the SSND delegation to the Commission on the Status of Women I learned about the many ways girls face discrimination in the world today. Our hope was that

by sharing the experiences of girls from all over the world we could make a difference in government policies and programs.

“Following this experience, I spent eight days on an alternative travel experience through Guatemala. Visiting a diverse array of communities, I found myself noticing the many issues I had learned about at the United Nations being played out before my eyes. Here, I put together the opportunities I was given to be at the United Nations, to work with Global Partners: Running Waters, Inc. (GPRW), and to feel the love of the people of Guatemala.

“The first way in which I noticed that women are discriminated against is in healthcare. Men usually have health coverage from their jobs but their families are not included.

“Women are also kept at the bottom of society because of housework. Obviously women do housework all over the world, but it is a huge responsibility for women in Guatemala because the time involved keeps women and girls from expanding their world through education.

“Related to housework is water. We visited the village of Chucalibal where a Global Partners water project was finished three weeks prior to our arrival. Before this project, the women and girls walked an hour and a half down the mountain to get water, do laundry, and bathe their children. Now they each have a faucet and sink outside of their homes.

“Gender-based violence is accepted in Guatemala. Since 2001, over 2,000 women and girls have been brutally killed in Guatemala. The government is not investigating fully and they are not prosecuting the perpetrators.

“Women and children are caught in a cycle of poverty. Some organizations are working to break the cycle but it is a slow process of education that will bring new opportunities.

“What did I learn? I learned that there is hope. With healthcare, water projects, and education, women and girls are empowered and they can break the cycle of discrimination. I learned how little it takes to change reality—a simple water faucet changes the world for people.”

S. Carolyn Jost, SSND, another member of the leadership team has also been involved opening others’ eyes to the needs and concerns for girls. She writes:

“I’m still pondering all I learned at the United Nations and the CSW. But I do feel it is important to share the experience with others. So I have printed some of the pictures from the CSW and when I visit schools I take them along and speak of our experiences.

“In April I visited three high schools in the Chicago area and spoke to more than 1,200 students. We set up the visit as “vocation fair.” Students visit various booths to learn about different religious congregations. I tried to capture their interest with a set of questions which they could only answer by visiting with me at the SSND booth. They included questions such as ‘Who visited the United Nations in February 2006?’ ‘What does CSW stand for?’ ‘Which international congregation has a sister serving at the United Nations?’ ‘Which congregation is transforming the lives of girls through education?’

“Once the students found their way to my table, I told them the stories of girls in Ghana, Peru and various other countries. I believe it's telling the stories of real people that touch lives.

“The students were very taken with how women and girls are discriminated against. They all saw the value of education as a way to transform lives and they expressed appreciation for their own education.”