



Customer Service » Lili Vianello

Empathy Challenge: Columbia woman breaks out of her comfort zone

On March 4, I was sitting in the Jefferson City Correctional Center, overwhelmed by my surroundings and pondering the paths that brought me, and others, to this place. No, this is not an exposé of my road to crime. Instead, I'd like to share with you a road to discovery I began traveling earlier this year.

Surrounded by murderers, I sat in the room that houses the Restore to Justice-Impact on Crime Program. I was listening to the inmates speak about the program, which introduces them to the concepts of remorse, helping them to see, even feel, the ripple effects of actions they have taken. My senses were heightened, hyper aware that the tattoo-covered double murderer beside me was dangerously close. And yet, surprisingly the sensation I felt was not fear, but empathy.

My feelings were not unique, as I later learned from others who had shared the experience. The 22 women joining me represented this year's class of Greater Missouri Leadership Challenge. We were all there to learn and be inspired, exposed to experiences designed to broaden our perspectives on life and living in the Show-Me State. Our visit to the correctional center was but one of many activities planned over 12 days throughout the state, but it was certainly one that made an impression on me.

Greater Missouri grew out of a model copied from the Lone Star State. In 1982, Gov. Ann Richards of Texas found it challenging to identify qualified female leaders to appoint to various state positions, commissions and boards. In order to fill the void, she helped establish a women's leadership training program targeted at mid-career professional women. Its goal: to specifically prepare women for state leadership positions. This later became known as "Leadership Texas." By 1990, Missouri had its own version of the program.

This year's class brings together female leaders from global corporations, small business, academia, government agencies and nonprofit organizations. Throughout the course of the year, the group is exposed to critical issues confronting our communities, state and nation.

Greater Missouri is an annual traveling symposium. So far, we've attended two three-day sessions in Columbia and Jefferson City. In mid-Missouri, we covered topics as diverse as film production, domestic abuse, youth education, the economy, stem cell research, drug abuse, crime and government. A starkly honest film about abuse made me cry at the same time it inspired me to move

beyond my personal complacency. The same day I shook hands with a murderer, I shook hands with a Missouri Supreme Court judge.

Our Kansas City session offered perspectives on history, health care, urban revitalization, mentoring, collaboration, law and order, hunger, race relations, breaking gender barriers and public service. I can't say that I agreed with everything I heard, and we all participated in some fairly heated, but perception-bending, discussion. I was challenged to think about common things in uncommon ways.

The day this column is to be published, we are scheduled to be in Kirksville. Historically, this session has focused on rural development, including employment, infrastructure, production agriculture and alternative fuels. Surely, being exposed to the processes of our food production will challenge the sensibilities of this avid animal lover. I'm open to gaining a new appreciation and respect

for the vital role our rural neighbors play in the overall functioning of our state and its economy. Our final session will take place in November in St. Louis.

Applicants are selected by the board of directors. Local leaders Brenda Harrison, Teresa Maledy and Jolene Schulz currently serve on the board. Participants represent a diverse cross-section of women from Missouri and its contiguous states. Each group is carefully chosen to reflect a balance of ethnic, cultural, geographic, career and philanthropic experiences. I've made friends among people I otherwise would never have had the opportunity to encounter.

If you are interested in being considered for the Greater Missouri Leadership Challenge, or if you know of an individual who would benefit from participation, visit www.greatermo.com. You can submit an application online. This year's deadline is September 30. The

program's goal is not to build empathy for offenders or even to promote a specific ideological agenda. Instead, it strives to free us from the prison of our closed minds, to offer growth and opportunity for women and to educate and inspire women leaders to make a difference. ♦

Lili Vianello is President of Visionworks Marketing & Communications, a Columbia-based full service advertising, marketing and public relations firm. Contributions to this article were made by Visionworks staff members, and portions were stolen liberally (with permission) from the Greater Missouri Web site and literature. Visit the Visionworks team online at www.visionworks.com

My senses were heightened, hyper aware that the tattoo-covered double murderer beside me was dangerously close. And yet, surprisingly the sensation I felt was not fear, but empathy.
