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S U C C E S S S T O R Y

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*Crucial Conversations at the
United Nations*

Marilu Southam
Geneva, Switzerland

“During the summer of 2004, my husband secured a coveted internship in Geneva, Switzerland, working for the United Nations. While we were there, I befriended the Geneva representative for a non-governmental organization for women. She was gearing up for the upcoming sub-commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights.

“Believing in the importance of this committee’s work, I became involved in their efforts to seek UN support to prevent human rights abuses to children. The focus was on child abduction and safety, and specifically, the oppression of religious expression, child soldiers, and young girls being sold into sex slavery. These abhorrent practices were being largely ignored by officials of certain countries. →

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“As the committee prepared to present to the sub-commission, I became concerned about the wording of the report they were drafting. I felt the severity of the issues at hand was being diluted. The committee informed me they had to take extreme caution not to offend certain country officials who “looked the other way” regarding these abuses for fear of damaging relationships. Regardless, I felt this was a crucial issue that would have significant consequences. I expressed my belief that it was possible to be both candid and respectful in presenting delicate information.

“To my surprise, they invited me to rewrite the report. I did, being careful to be honest while maintaining respect. The committee agreed that my version was more forthright and showed appropriate consideration.

“Ten days before the report was to be presented, the committee chairperson asked me to make the presentation! This was both an honor and a shock. I agreed to do it, and I spent the next several days preparing and getting very little sleep in anticipation of the event.

“My turn finally came. After I finished presenting, many people were teary eyed. Others hurried over to ask me for a copy of my speech for various networking and documenting purposes, as was standard for all presentations. As they approached, some were emotional and many expressed thanks to me for surfacing the issues. Several asked for my business card. As a 22-year-old student, I didn’t have one.

“I learned many lessons through this experience, but one that stands out is the importance of realizing it is possible to be both candid and respectful with the right set of skills. The consequences can be significant.”

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