

Networking professionalism

By Deepti Nair

“I love to help people in need,” says Christina Zini, founder, leader and the thrust behind Qatar Professional Women’s Network – the country’s first and only informal women’s networking organisation born to “help women meet, share, learn and achieve their dreams.”

“Whether it’s a newbie in Qatar who wants to make friends or a child in Ethiopia who needs shoes, helping a human in need gives me deep and unique satisfaction. It may sound like cliché, but it is what motivates me and inspires me to continue,” she asserts.



Women at the QPWN Iftar event

The progenitor of a popular and ever expanding platform, Christina's achievement of turning an idea into an organisation with over six hundred members, a thousand Facebook fans and multiple annual constructive programs in just under a year's time is no mean feat.

When she first came to Qatar in September 2009, Christina was impressed by the booming city, enthralled by the beauty at the Corniche, and impressed with the tradition of the people and the ambition they have for Qatar. But she also felt an acute lack of a platform for professional women to meet and interact.

"There were networks for stay-at-home mothers or sport enthusiasts, but, frankly speaking, I didn't find, after a good search around, any tangible networking platform for a working professional woman," she says.

"This very lack of such a platform led me to the idea to start a mentoring program where seasoned woman professionals could pair up with younger professionals and students to create a relationship of mutual learning. I could do that in two ways: first, I could go and approach other woman in universities and schools, for example, on my own. And I could try to establish a permanent platform where they could meet on a regular basis. I chose the second option as I realized it would be much more helpful if there was an organization behind me," explains Christina.

Deciding to do something about it, in February 2010, a very determined Christina invited a group of women she had met, on a dinner where they had their first brainstorming about the possibilities and prospects of setting up a forum.

"That was our first strategic planning session for a networking platform. Started with just twelve women around my dining table, we now have several hundred women members and around a thousand Facebook fans. QPWN did not only become a reality; it grew beyond our expectations. Today, QPWN is an approachable forum – cross-cultural, informal and open to all. Women of all backgrounds, irrespective of their nationality, age, profession or education can learn from their more professional counterparts and support each other's development."

One of the best features of QPWN is that there is no membership fee and all events are on a pay-by-event basis. The organisation has twenty members in its core planning team who are responsible for coordinating and arranging all the events.

"We have monthly 'after-work' networking meetings at popular and convenient locations which are open for all. Our smallest after-work meeting was attended by forty five women participants and the largest had over a hundred and ten."

Christina feels that QPWN has grown so rapidly because of the huge demand for such a group in the community.

“Working women don’t have the flexibility or the luxury of going for coffee mornings or doing the moms-together-with-kids kind of activity. For them, this is the only way to meet other woman outside their work environment which not only helps women acclimate but also help them learn about opportunities and job vacancies.”



Christina with Amanda Palmer at the QPWN launch

The LinkedIn group for QPWN has regular discussions on job vacancies and inputs from women who are looking for work. Many top recruiting agencies also use the networking forum to attract woman candidates.

“We recently ran our first recruitment workshop with the help of an international recruitment agency, in which twenty five women participated. The workshop advised women on how to look for job vacancies, the right way to prepare their resume and how to apply, among others. The event was filled out within a few days and now we have a huge waiting list for the next one. We hope to pair with a few more recruitment agencies so that in the future we can turn the recruitment workshops into a quarterly or monthly event.”

Christina’s aspiration for QPWN, however, is not restricted to networking between professional women. They had earlier organized an ‘Iftar’ event during the holy month of Ramadan to support and rehabilitate the Pakistani flood victims. The event also had a speaker educate the attendees on the meaning of Ramadan and helped the non-Muslim women learn more about Islam and its traditions.

“It was a one-of-a-kind cross-cultural event where women from different backgrounds had an opportunity to ask questions which they otherwise may be unable to ask. It was wonderful not only because it was for a worthy cause but also because it was educational. We hope to do more of such cultural events in the future also to promote cross-cultural awareness and understanding,” smiles Christina.

QPWN’s biggest achievement till date has been the ‘Dream Big’ launch, which was recently held and was attended by over two hundred women. The highlight of

the event was the announcement of the winners of the ‘Dream Big’ essay competition. Christina’s eyes shine with pride as she talks about the success of the event.

“It was a miracle. To pull off an event of that size with two hundred paid and ticketed guests and three amazing speakers. It was a real miracle that all came together. For me it was an honour to have read the dreams of all the women who entered the ‘Dream Big’ essay competition, dreams for themselves, their families and their countries. I have big dreams too. I’m dreaming about starting my own business to coach and develop women leaders. I’m also dreaming about having a family someday- of being a mom who inspires and encourage her children to follow their passions and make their mark on the world.”

“When I’m at the end of my own life, I hope to look back and know in my heart that I made a difference in thousands of people’s lives, and that the world is a better place because of me.”

QPWN is not Christina’s only contribution to the community; she has continually been part of different organizations and support groups. Born and raised in the United States of America, Christina has lived in Amsterdam, where she was employed as a management consultant and professional development leader with IBM Global Business Services. While in the Netherlands, she was actively involved with supporting a domestic violence shelter; helping women who were facing domestic violence situations. She has also been zealously involved with IBM’s women leadership and development programs.



Women networking at a QPWN meeting

In Qatar, the November of 2010 saw her become part of a goodwill mission to Ethiopia. The aim was to create awareness and raise funds to support The Fistula Foundation and Yezelalem Minch, an Ethiopian orphanage. This goodwill mission to a country disadvantaged by poverty, violence and illness demonstrates her innate passion for supporting humanity.

PROFILE

Christina believes that she can be a role model for others only if she herself takes the first step towards realizing her own dreams. It was this belief that led her to resign from her long-time employer – IBM – after over thirteen years of service. The aim: to pursue her dream of launching a business focused on developing women.

“Although it was a difficult decision to make, I decided that I could not encourage other women to dream big if I wasn’t actively pursuing my own dreams.”

After staying in the Netherlands for almost nine years, Christina, who had aspirations to move around the world and live abroad, was delighted when her husband got an employment offer from Qatar Shell. She got herself transferred to IBM Middle East so she could accompany him.

“Though Qatar has a lot of organization and modernization, what makes it interesting is that every day feels like a new adventure. Coming from Amsterdam, which is a very old city with the streets really narrow and cobblestoned, I found a sharp contrast with the modernism of Doha, which reminds me of America. But one of the biggest changes was getting used to driving again. In Amsterdam, I didn’t own a car, I used to ride a bicycle,” she laughs.

Christina met her husband, Thierry de Cock Buning – whom she calls her ‘rock’ for the support, love, comfort and joy that he provides – on a flight from London to Amsterdam.

“He encourages me to follow my dreams and supports my ambitions wholeheartedly. Thierry is very

successful in his own career, yet he doesn’t expect a wife who takes care of the housework while he’s at work. He shares in the household responsibilities, often doing more than his share of grocery shopping and cooking!”

Christina’s strong desire to support fellow women in the community is deep rooted in her experience as a young girl. Her mother, who passed away recently from ovarian cancer, was a teacher with a special interest in developing girls. She raised her two daughters to be strong, well-educated and successful women.

“Even when diagnosed with advanced ovarian cancer, my mom continued to work as she loved teaching and found so much joy in her students. She faced her cancer courageously, always maintaining a positive attitude and outlook. My mom’s serenity in her final days gives me comfort as I grieve this tremendous loss. I still feel her love and hear her whispering words of encouragement in my ear, inspiring me to make a positive difference in our world by serving others.”

Christina, whose eyes swell and voice chokes up as she talks about her mother’s enormous influence on her, had a strong bond with her mother. She is still struggling to cope with the painful loss. It is her mother’s influence, she says, that continues to drive her to make a positive difference in the world.

“When I’m at the end of my own life, I hope to look back and know in my heart that I made a difference in thousands of people’s lives, and that the world is a better place because of me.”

Cover Photo Courtesy: Dr. Rajka Milanovic Galbraith



Christina at a QPWN after work networking event