

Profiles in EXCELLENCE

Natalie Nardone, CMP —
Leading The Way To Success

CHRISTINA WHITEHEAD, CMP • Access Meetings & Events



Natalie Nardone, CMP just completed the Bicycle Ride Across Georgia (BRAG) on a tandem bike with her husband, Dave. For most people, just finding the time to take a nice bike ride around the neighborhood on a weekend would be admirable; never one to do things minimally, Nardone and her husband biked over 400 miles from Dalton to Augusta on their two-seater. Emblematic of her unique ability to function both as a leader and a team member, the tandem bike took some getting used to. However, according to Nardone it “solidified our ability to work as a team, improved our communication and made our marriage stronger — while getting a great workout.”

This dedication to teamwork, commitment to communicate, and general optimistic outlook are all blended with the ability to lead through inspiration, and it is no wonder that Nardone has recently been awarded both the Meeting Professionals International Georgia Chapter (GaMPI) Planner of the Year designation, as well as the award for Tomorrow's Leaders at the Meeting Professionals International (MPI) World Education Congress (WEC) Awards. The prestigious Tomorrow's Leaders Award is presented to an MPI member who has made significant contributions to the association at the international and/or local level.

Always the team player, Nardone credits her GaMPI peers with her success, “I have always considered myself fortunate to be surrounded by so many outstanding professionals in the meetings industry. These individuals have served as my mentors as I've progressed both professionally and personally. In an industry that has given so much to me, it's naturally fulfilling to give my time and energies back and be

rewarded in this way.”

From the thunderous applause that marked both award ceremonies, it's clear that the members of GaMPI and MPI reciprocate the feeling.

This year marks a step up for Nardone in her GaMPI involvement, from Managing Editor of *BreakOut* to Director of Publications. It's a natural progression for Nardone, and surely just the start of things to come for this award-winning achiever. Having taken *BreakOut* to a completely new level over the last two years, Nardone now plays mentor and guide in her new role as director.

There's a consistent note of admirable determination, constancy and competency that plays throughout Nardone's history, both in her professional and personal life. Stability and consistency were a fortunate aspect of Nardone's childhood, spent in Stockbridge with parents whom she refers to as “my ultimate mentors.” Her father taught high school for over 30 years, and her mother maintained the household where her parents still reside. The values that Nardone learned in her family provided a personal ethics structure that shows through clearly in all of her endeavors and achievements.



Nardone and husband on BRAG
Photo courtesy of Miles McClelland
Natural Light Photography

It's apparent that leadership has also been a life-long quality of Nardone. It originally manifested in a desire to teach, and to lead tomorrow's youth. She attended Piedmont College in Northeast Georgia, where she received her B.A. with a double major in Business Administration and English. In keeping with Nardone's history of going above and beyond, she also managed a double minor in Secondary Education and French. In addition to a degree, Nardone walked away with the heart of her husband, Dave. What started with a date at Waffle House took only two years to

turn into wedding bells, and it's been a happy life for the Nardones ever since.

After a stint of student teaching, Nardone realized that her talents and desires did not actually lie in teaching, and she took a position at a state trade association, the Georgia Automobile Dealers Association (GADA). As so often happens in this industry, a twist of fate (and co-workers on maternity leave) landed Nardone in charge of their annual convention and educational seminars — and a meeting professional was born. Nardone cut her teeth on association planning with four years at the GADA, but switched sides for a year to work as the Atlanta-based association sales manager for the Augusta Marriott Hotel & Suites. As the sales liaison with associations and government groups, Nardone realized that her true passion lay on the meeting planning side, particularly with associations. Departing the world of sales, she took that brave leap of faith and formed her own consulting company, Nardone Consulting Group Inc.

While being an independent planner is a dream come true for many, it is not without its struggles. Many find the biggest struggle to be time, and Nardone agrees that determining the best use of her time is a challenge. Nardone states, "Specifically, as you grow a business, when do you begin to outsource? What do you keep in-house, while still maintaining life/work balance? My first year was so busy because I felt I had to keep all aspects of jobs in-house. Since then, as the business has grown, I have successfully figured out when and when not to outsource so that I maintain that balance."

It's clear to an observer that Nardone is in her element as an independent. Her high level of capability coupled with her organizational skills are the reasons she has maintained a dedicated client base. But looking to the future, the always optimistic Nardone doesn't rule out the right opportunity with another company. "I never say 'never' to going to a fulltime, in-house position if it were the right fit," she says, "Mainly because one never knows what the future holds. I know some independents did this while raising small children and then went back to full-time positions; others have stayed with their own business for years. I know time and life will ultimately dictate future employment decisions, but for now I am dedicated to my clients and enjoy the flexibility and productivity of working in my own office and having complete control over my work environment."

Despite the time commitment needed to run her own business, Nardone has been an active volunteer, both for



Nardone Receiving Tomorrow's Leaders Award

GaMPI and for causes close to her heart. "My family is now gearing up for my mother's third battle with ovarian cancer. It's a silent, unpredictable type of cancer to fight, but we're ready. We plan on having my mom around for years to come." Nardone now devotes time to studying ovarian cancer research and advocating for awareness. At home she and her husband are the dedicated parents of five wonderful feline companions.

Looking back over the last four years as an active member of GaMPI, Nardone is grateful for her experiences. "I have experienced professional growth well beyond what one can pick up in a textbook. I have learned about passion, dedication and rewarding hard work. I have learned to keep an open-mind, listening more and talking less. Mom was right; you do learn a lot this way! I have also acquired patience I never knew I had. I have learned about personalities and picking your battles. Leadership is not a one-dimensional part of a person that one acquires through a degree; it's also not acquired overnight. Leadership is constantly evolving through new experiences."

With her two shining awards and the new mantle of director, it's clear that 2006 is Nardone's year to Shine! ☺



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