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Brickell woman wins award for raising awareness about human trafficking - Kristin Francisco, 26, won a \$10,000 award from Northwestern Mutual to help raise awareness about sex trafficking in Miami-Dade County.

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As Brickell resident Kristin Francisco, 26, looks at her bulletin board, full of magazine cutouts of her role models and inspiring quotes she calls her "vision board," she smiles.

"I've accomplished pretty much everything on it," Francisco said. "It's time to make a new one."

Francisco was awarded \$10,000 as a 2012 winner of the Northwestern Mutual Foundation's 18th Annual Community Service Award. More than 9,000 employees of Northwestern Mutual apply for the award, but only 26 win. The recipients are to use the money to help an organization or charity that they are involved in, and on June 28, Francisco handed the check over to Debi Harris, CEO of Women's Fund of Miami-Dade.

The Women's Fund is an organization that sets out to empower women, and one of their biggest campaigns focuses on the sex trafficking of young girls.

"In the Miami area during the past nine months, the FBI and the Minor Vice Task Force have arrested 10 people, charged or convicted 14 others, sentenced 7 more defendants and recovered more than 40 children involved in prostitution," FBI Supervisory Special Agent Alan Santiago said.

Statistics show Miami is ranked in the top 10 in the country for sex trafficking.

"The money will be used to support the work that we do to inform the community about this issue, which includes working with law enforcement," Harris said. "We were very excited when Kristin got passionate about it and went to her company to apply for the award."

Northwestern Mutual managing partner Kevin Lawhon said he wouldn't want any other person winning the award and using the money to make a stamp in the community.

"Winning the Northwestern Mutual Community Service Award is a tremendous professional and personal accomplishment for Kristin," Lawhon said. "As her managing partner, this distinction is a great source of pride for me and serves to underscore our commitment to give back to the community."

Francisco ensured that her contribution will not be strictly financial, as a financial representative she said she is going to have an active role in allocating the funds.

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“A lot of the money will be going to the Kristi House,” Francisco said. “I want to make sure that it actually goes to awareness, not just operating funds for the organization.”

The Kristi House is a children’s advocacy center dedicated to help victims of sexual abuse.

Kristin’s successful career as a businesswoman and community activist all started with a stamp on a brochure, she said.

Francisco was born and raised in a small town of Amsterdam in upstate New York. When the time came to start looking at colleges, her parents wanted her to look at schools up north or in Canada. But, when Francisco received a brochure in the mail from University of Miami, she made an instant decision.

“I saw the palm trees and the ibis and knew this is where I wanted to go,” she said. “My parents said as long as I could find a way to pay for it then I could go.”

After getting her acceptance letter to the only school she applied to, she headed south in 2003.

“I always say the person who put the stamp on that brochure changed my life,” Francisco said. “I don’t know who they are, but I’m thankful for them.”

Kristin said after about a year of culture shock and second-guessing the Miami move, South Florida began to grow on her.

Working as a waitress to help pay for school, Kristin didn’t want to go home during the summer. She decided to apply for an internship during her junior year. She went to a career fair and stopped at the first booth she spotted, Northwestern Mutual. She was hired on the spot at age 19 and has been working with the company and gaining clients ever since.

She credits her confidence to Charles Downs, managing director at Northwestern Mutual. He said he is not surprised by her win.

“What makes Kristin special is her passion for making a positive impact in our community and her willingness to go the extra mile in serving others,” Downs said. “This is true in her career calling as well as in her community service.”

In 2007, Francisco was featured in an MTV show called, A Day in the Life, which aims to inspire college students to find their dream job.

“I think always being away from my family made me keep challenging myself,” Francisco said. “The thing that made me feel better was to not think of myself.”

Francisco graduated with a bachelor’s in business administration in 2006, after only three years of college. Shortly after graduating, she attended a Women’s Fund Event with all of her clients and was instantly drawn to the cause. In 2011, she became the youngest board member for the Women’s Fund.

After helping organize multiple events, and raising money from her clients, Francisco believed she had enough to apply for the community service award. Harris said it was a pleasure to write her recommendation letter.

Francisco, like any other twenty-something posted a picture of her handing the check to Harris, and her father, Jeffrey Francisco proudly reposted it with the caption, “She does prove that goodness and kindness does alternate generations.”

As for other young women looking to make a difference or just land a dream job, Francisco said keeping a vision is key.

“Write it down. For me, it was always creating a vision board and visualizing what I want my amazing future to look like,” she said. “Just plan what you want and just look at it. Don’t be afraid to go after your dreams because some people don’t have the opportunity to.”

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