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An insurance industry lobbyist with a calling

By MEG FLETCHER

Anyone who thinks that an effective insurance industry lobbyist has to be a cigar-puffing, whiskey-swilling operator who doles out campaign contributions hasn't met Mary Lanning.

At first glance, she appears to be everybody's favorite Irish aunt—a 5-ft. 2-in. dynamo whose blue eyes sparkle as brightly as her quick wit.

Listen to her talk, and you hear street smarts combined with a profound understanding of human nature. Those characteristics have made New York-based ML&G Associates Inc., her lobbying and consulting firm, an effective advocate and mediator for her insurance industry clients, according to leading legislators, regulators and industry representatives.

But that is only half of her life.

Mary Lanning is also a Roman Catholic nun, who in 1970 left a Dominican monastery after 13 years to live independently as a member of the service-oriented Sisters for Christian Community.

Ms. Lanning calls on her decades of experience as the eldest daughter in a family of 11, a hospice volunteer and grief counselor, to provide a compassionate ear and practical advice to those who face life-changing losses or problems. She also develops and coordinates free services for the elderly and terminally ill, regardless of their religious beliefs.

In what one friend calls "her 36-hour days," Ms. Lanning is especially devoted to helping the homeless with food and



PHOTO: DOUG GOODMAN

Ms. Lanning

necessities. For decades, she has coordinated scores of volunteers—including insurance industry executives, legislators, firefighters, stockbrokers, senior citizens, students and church groups—in the preparation, serving and sharing of an outdoor gourmet feast on Thanksgiving Day. Last year, nearly 1,200 people gathered for food and fellowship at a blocked-off street near her one-room apartment in Harlem.

Currently, she supports her charitable work primarily from her earnings and small contributions from family and friends.

Until the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, Ms. Lanning shied away from publicity for herself. She blocked media coverage of

the Thanksgiving feast in order to preserve the dignity of its guests.

The native New Yorker also downplayed her religious affiliation because, as she says with characteristic candor, she found "that people had such low expectations once they learned I was a nun."

Her vocation inadvertently became public knowledge as she counseled the grief-stricken families of the 295 employees of Marsh & McLennan Cos. Inc., a client, who were killed on Sept. 11. The name tag she was issued as a volunteer at Marsh's Family Assistance Center was based on her driver's license, which identified her as "Sister Mary Lanning." As a result, business colleagues who had known her

for years became aware for the first time of her membership in a religious community.

Previously, the only outward sign of her religious commitment was the narrow gold ring she wears on her right hand, in the European tradition among nuns. It is her deceased mother's wedding ring, minus the decorative orange blossoms, which were filed off in keeping with her commitment to living simply.

Counseling the grieving after Sept. 11 "had the effect of bringing me out of the closet," said Ms. Lanning. For once, all her identities—insurance lobbyist, businesswoman, New Yorker and nun—"were one," she said.

She "provided wonderful counseling to families of our deceased colleagues," said John T. Sinnott, the chairman and chief executive officer of Marsh Inc., Marsh & McLennan's brokerage arm.

Since 1994, ML&G Associates—literally, "Mary Lanning and God"—has primarily represented brokers and insurers by lobbying legislators and regulators, mediating hardship cases and consulting on new products.

Ms. Lanning established her firm after working for eight years as the executive director of the Insurance Brokers' Assn. of the State of New York, which is still an ML&G client. In addition, she has two decades of insurance industry and business experience, including developing and managing a technical resources division at former broker Johnson & Higgins and managing international compliance at

Skandia America Reinsurance Corp., where she began her career in insurance.

She also has been a longtime participant in several groups that advise insurance and social service organizations. In addition, she regularly takes part in industry advisory activities with national organizations representing state insurance legislators and commissioners.

Ms. Lanning's "knowledge and understanding of the business is substantial and broad and...invaluable in lobbying effectively for the industry," said Richard Bouhan, the executive director of the National Assn. of Professional Surplus Lines Offices Ltd. in Kansas City, Mo.

"I feel that her greatest strengths as an insurance industry lobbyist and consultant are her honesty, dedication and loyalty to her cause," said Sen. William J. Larkin Jr., R-New Windsor, chair of the New York Senate's Majority Steering Committee and the current president of the National Conference of Insurance Legislators.

Industry leaders say Ms. Lanning is known as a great listener and writer. But it is "her great sense of humor" and love of a good story that draws people to her, said Peter A. Lefkin, senior vp-government and external affairs for Allianz of America in Washington.

Since traditional lobbyists "have a bigger lobbying budget than mine—which is zero—I've had to prevail on substance, merit and personal credibility, as well as making my position intelligible," Ms. Lanning explained.

As a communicator, she said, "I open the door for people to explain their position to me. That gives me more opportunities to identify points that we can agree on and areas where I can explain away their concerns or find an alternative solution to address their concerns."

"Mary's greatest strength is her ability to fully understand the issue, to correctly frame it and to articulate it with clarity to legislators," said Marsh's Mr. Sinnott.

As a negotiator, Ms. Lanning says she "is passionate about the process of compromise, because that is the essence of democracy. It is the only way that people

can live together in peace."

"I genuinely want to find a way that I can—maybe by creativity and resourcefulness—give them what they were trying to achieve, but give it to them in a different way that doesn't harm my client," she said.

Furthermore, "if I don't understand other viewpoints I hear, I'm not at all shy about asking them about the politics as well as the substantive arguments," Ms. Lanning said. "I think it's very difficult to separate politics from public policy."

Ms. Lanning said she crafts compromises "by making each party understand the limitations of any solution that we might eventually agree to, so we don't spin wheels and waste a lot of time haggling."

Before Ms. Lanning agrees to take on a client's case, whether in Albany or before other legislative or regulatory bodies, she sets certain ground rules. "I tell my clients upfront, 'If you want this, you have to want it all the way,'" she said.

Ms. Lanning said she would not ask a legislator to do "the heavy horsetrading" that he or she must do only to have her client walk away in the middle of the process. "If I'm in it, I'm in it until the end," she said.

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Jay Martin
LeBoeuf, Lamb, Greene & MacRae

Ms. Lanning "is among the most intelligent and articulate people" on the Albany scene, said the spokesman for Assemblyman Peter Grannis, D-Manhattan, who chairs the New York State Assembly Insurance Committee.

"Beyond that easygoing and charming personality, she is very dogged and determined, takes her duties to clients very seriously, has energy to burn. All of these qualities make her a formidable lobbyist," Assemblyman Grannis said.

Dealing with New York state issues means that Ms. Lanning

drives at least three hours each way from Harlem to Albany and stays for a few days each week throughout the year. When the Legislature is not in session, she can often be found educating staff members and solidifying relationships with them. These efforts often pay off in the future, she said, if the staff members rise to positions of prominence.

Her style of lobbying "wears out a lot of shoes," Ms. Lanning says.

"At every level—commissioner or clerk, CEO or assistant, governor or aide—Mary treats everyone with the same respect and importance," said Peter H. Bickford, a partner with the law firm of Cozen O'Connor in New York.

As a result, she enjoys bipartisan affection.

"It's pretty remarkable to see hard-boiled politicians and lawyers embrace her and give her a hug, even if they don't agree with her position," said Jay Martin, a partner with LeBoeuf, Lamb, Greene & MacRae L.L.P. in Albany.

Mr. Martin is also on the board of directors of YES! Solutions, a nonprofit charitable organization Ms. Lanning founded. The organization plans to begin fund-raising activities in the near future.

And Ms. Lanning's reputation extends beyond Albany, as she provides services to clients nationwide.

She said she gets "a lot of hardship cases from individuals and companies" who have been notified that state commissioners are threatening to suspend or revoke their licenses, in addition to imposing significant financial penalties. The threats usually result from the failure to meet requirements, such as agents' responsibility for continuing education.

She will take on such a case if the client is "not a bad player" and she can find some mitigating circumstances that the client is willing to acknowledge. In such cases, regulators usually are somewhat compassionate, Ms. Lanning said.

"In her business capacity, she has always been viewed as an extremely honest individual who is quick to bring reason and compromise when various individuals have differences,"

said John Oxendine, Georgia's insurance commissioner. Indeed, Ms. Lanning is "a peacemaker," he said.

In addition to lobbying and advocacy work, Ms. Lanning consults on insurance-related issues, including the development of new products, such as alternative risk financing and collateralization-type products designed to meet global trading needs.

To those who know her, Ms. Lanning "works so hard in the secular world in order to support her good works, and not for personal gain," said Nick Pearson, a partner with Edwards & Angell L.L.P. in New York.

Unfortunately, "I have witnessed too many instances where business contacts and clients believe they are entitled to the same free assistance from her on their business problems as with her charitable endeavors," said Mr. Bickford of Cozen O'Connor.

Yet, "I have never met anyone that has the unaffected instinct, drive and ability to care for people in need, whether the homeless, the dying, the grieving or the business client with an impossible hill to climb," he said.

Among those who regard Ms. Lanning with "awe" is Donald G. Mauro, a Marsh vp and aviation insurance broker whose wife was one of the World Trade Center victims.

Over the past nine months, her counseling has helped Mr. Mauro cope with his loss. To assist him with the painful task of packing up and giving away his wife's clothes, Ms. Lanning recently established "The Petite Boutique" at a Harlem shelter. At the boutique, volunteer consultants helped needy women select clothing they could use.

"Since there were many business suits, Mary felt that these women could use the clothing to go out on job interviews," Mr. Mauro said. "I'm consoled by the thought that my wife's clothes may be helping less-fortunate women get ahead in life," he said.

Summing up, Mr. Mauro said that, to him and the many others whose lives Mary Lanning has touched, "she's New York's very own Mother Teresa."