

Hearts Ignited

Two North Carolina women are living proof that, per Luke 1:37, nothing is impossible for God. Not planning a conference for hundreds of Catholics while home schooling children and raising families. Not lining up in-demand speakers. Not coordinating travel arrangements,

by **DANA LORELLE**

fund-raising and scheduling that make up the tiny but essential details of any conference or convention. Not even trying to put everything together in just a few months' time.

They'll do all that and more to put on their fourth Ignited by Truth Conference come Feb. 18 in Raleigh, N.C. (ignitedbytruth.com).

Four years ago, Ursula Ruiz was on a committee to organize a local conference for

other home-schooling parents. "Nothing was working out," the mother of three remembers. "It wasn't panning out at all. We decided to drop the idea."

She made some phone calls to officially put the home-school conference to rest. "No sooner had I hung up the phone than it hit me: This isn't supposed to be a conference for home schoolers. It was supposed to be a conference for everybody."

A few months later, Ruiz and fellow home-schooling mother Christine Sulzen looked out over a crowd of hundreds and welcomed them to the first Ignited by Truth Catholic Conference in Raleigh, N.C.

The lineup for this year's conference includes Alice Von Hildebrand, George Weigel and Stephen Ray.

Behind it all — behind the speakers and workshops and sleepless nights and unforeseen obstacles — are two women whose faith sparked them into action.

Each year the all-day event, including a teen track, mixes



From home-schooling moms to national conference organizers: Ursula Ruiz (l) and Christine Sulzen, the driving force behind Ignited by Truth. For conference details, go to: ignitedbytruth.com

presenters whose styles and messages speak to broad demographics of Catholics. There are witness talks, personal talks that illustrate practical skills, discussions of current events, and presentations

by well-known Catholics such as Patrick Madrid. Past years have brought Janet Smith, Dr. Ray Guarendi and Carl Olsen.

That first year, when Ignited by Truth was still an unknown quantity and with just over 100 days to plan, the women still managed to entice some popular speakers — and 700 attendees.

They could have delayed the conference for one year and given themselves more time to plan, but in hindsight say they know the Holy Spirit propelled their decision to give themselves just months.

"God didn't think it was too little time," says Ruiz. "We figured, why wait? There are souls that need igniting. The whole idea behind the conference is to embrace your faith and realize what a gift it is."

That's exactly what Ruiz and Sulzen were simultaneously but separately discovering in 2001 when Ruiz sent out an e-mail to the local home-school group asking for help in planning the conference. Sulzen jumped at the idea,

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although she barely knew Ruiz.

A friendship started, and Ignited by Truth soon followed.

"It was almost like we were holding hands and jumping off a cliff," says Sulzen. "The pressure was incredible, but the zeal for souls kept us going."

Father Jeffrey Ingham, pastor of St. Anthony of Padua Church in Southern Pines, N.C., recalls his first question when the women approached him in 2001 with their idea. "I thought, 'How are you going to do this?'" he says. From that first incredulous question came a partnership with the parish, which now handles the financial aspect of planning by accepting and writing checks.

Of Ruiz and Sulzen, Father Ingham says: "They certainly are balls of fire. I don't know how they do what they do, but they do it. They have a vision and they follow up on it."

They also enlisted the approval of the Diocese of Raleigh. "The diocesan relationship is a supportive one, just as it is with

Charismatic Renewal, Cursillo and Marriage Encounter," says Terry Jackson, director of evangelization and catechesis for the diocese. Such groups, he says, address the first goal of the U.S. bishops' document "Go and Make Disciples: A National Plan and Strategy for Evangelization in the United States" by challenging Catholics to "bring about in all Catholics such an enthusiasm for their faith that, in living their faith in Jesus, they freely share it with others."

Overcoming Obstacles

For that first conference, Sulzen and Ruiz made phone calls and sent e-mails searching for speakers and funds. Donations started pouring in. They reserved space at Cardinal Gibbons High School in Raleigh for the Saturday event. A friend's husband designed their website and created postcards and flyers. They didn't have time to worry about the cost of marketing and printing, but it didn't matter, because they found that just when they spent too much money the next day's mail would contain a donor's check.

Jeff Cavins, popular Catholic author, speaker and broadcaster,

spoke at last year's Ignited by Truth. "I do conferences all over the country," he says, "and of all the conferences that I go to there are a few that stand out for their warmth and hospitality. Ignited by Truth is one of them. Those people are just hungry for the Lord."

It might not have had the sheen of professionally organized events, adds Cavins, but "you had the sense that it was your average, everyday Catholics behind it," and for him that made it even better.

Sulzen suffered two flat tires on her way to the first conference as an ominous sky predicted a paralyzing ice storm. A serious head injury to Ruiz delayed the preparations for the second Ignited by Truth Conference.

And, right before the third conference, Sulzen gave birth to her fourth child.

The two have learned to expect obstacles and see them as a way to further trust in God and in his plan.

"We're not in any way unique or extraordinary," says Ruiz. "We just feel blessed to have been asked by God to organize this."

Dana Lorelle writes from Cary, North Carolina.