

Seattle PR firm reveals efforts to free Amanda Knox

By Heidi Dietrich – Contributing Writer

Oct 21, 2011, 8:00am

David Marriott never visited Amanda Knox during her four years in an Italian prison.

He met her this month, when she stepped off a plane in Seattle.

Yet for Knox and her family, Marriott was as important a player in her ordeal as anyone in the courtroom. As Knox's publicist, beginning three days after her arrest, Marriott worked to convince the international public that she did not murder her British roommate while studying in Perugia.

"Hiring him was one of the smartest things we ever did," said Curt Knox, Amanda's father.

The partnership between the Knox family and Marriott illustrates the potential of a public relations campaign to shift sentiment — and possibly even influence a verdict. With Amanda Knox safely back on American soil, Marriott and the family can now provide a behind-the-scenes glimpse of what went into the campaign.

Marriott, principal in the Seattle PR firm Gogerty Marriott, took on Knox in the face of a global onslaught of negative press. Once Italian authorities arrested the University of Washington exchange student on suspicion of killing Meredith Kercher, Knox was labeled a vicious "she-devil" and sex-crazed "Foxy Knoxy" in media around the world.

By enlisting her friends and family, and targeting specific news organizations to tell the family's story, Marriott eventually helped reshape how the world saw the young American. And now, with Amanda safely back home in West Seattle, Marriott turns to a new set of challenges.

Tabloid photographers snap Amanda's errands and walks. Marriott said he and the family don't try to hide her from the paparazzi, as that would just make her home another prison.

Then, there's the need for money. Curt Knox and Amanda's mother, Edda Mellas — they are not married to each other — have each said they've drained their retirement funds, taken out second mortgages and accrued credit card debt to pay for Amanda's defense. So, in this new phase, lucrative media deals will be a consideration.

At Marriott's downtown Seattle office, he fields inquiries from book agents, screenwriters, news shows and movie studios. All want the Amanda Knox saga for their own. Some are offering big bucks. Marriott and the Knox family will be considering the offers, Marriott said — likely in a couple of weeks.

"There will be financial opportunities," Marriott said. "I'll be there to walk them through the

opportunities.”

Both Marriott and Curt Knox say that Amanda wants to tell her story.

“Amanda will speak for herself,” Marriott said. “There are a bunch of options available to her, and the question is which will give her the chance to tell her story with dignity and class.”

Desperate for help

Though Marriott didn’t know it when he took on the project, the Amanda Knox trial was to become the longest and most difficult project of his career.

After Amanda’s arrest on Nov. 6, 2007, family members were bombarded with media requests. Nobody knew how to handle them.

Curt Knox reached out to an executive at the Macy’s Northwest regional office in Seattle, where he was employed. He asked for advice on a publicist who could handle a case of such magnitude, and the exec recommended Marriott. The PR veteran had made a name for himself in crisis management situations, such as the Alaska Airlines Flight 261 crash in 2000 that killed all 88 passengers and crew.

Marriott signed on with the Knox family three days after Amanda’s arrest, for financial terms neither side will disclose. Marriott immediately put out a press release directing all media and interview requests to him. It was, Curt Knox says, instant relief.

Beyond giving the family breathing room, Marriott needed to develop a long-term media strategy. The initial negative press reports on Amanda happened so quickly, Marriott was left trying to redefine her persona. Many stories painted her as promiscuous and irresponsible.

“Our job was to try to correct the misconceptions out there about who Amanda Knox was,” Marriott said. “The British and Italian tabloids created this horrible person, and I felt it was our responsibility to tell the truth.”

Anne Bremner, counsel for Friends of Amanda Knox, said Marriott faced an uphill challenge when he took on the case. (Friends of Amanda Knox, a group of supporters, formed in 2008 to run social media campaigns and raise money for her case. Marriott was not directly involved with the group.)

“The initial perceptions were that it was a slam-dunk case against her,” Bremner said. “The most important thing for Dave was to shine light on the fact that there was no evidence.”

Initially, the Knox lawyers asked her parents to not give interviews, as they didn’t want it to seem as though the family was trying to prejudice the judge and jury.

And so, Marriott turned to Amanda’s friends from the UW and Seattle Prep. He enlisted them to

talk to the media about the diligent student and loving friend they knew. In the process, Marriott began to truly believe in Amanda Knox himself.

“I really came to strongly believe her innocence,” Marriott said. “Kids don’t do a 180 on you when they leave home. The stuff in the tabloids simply didn’t make logical sense.”

Then, in early 2008, Marriott took the publicity campaign one step further by persuading Amanda’s lawyers to allow the Knox family to give interviews.

“I said, ‘We are getting killed here,’ ” Marriott said. “We need to have Mom and Dad.”

The lawyers consented, but cautioned Amanda’s parents against talking about case specifics. They should instead focus on their daughter’s true personality. The Knox family, who’d felt silenced for months, couldn’t wait to begin.

“There was absolute character assassination,” Curt Knox said. “The only thing we could do as parents was get the truth out there.”

Amanda’s sister told a story about Amanda carrying a spider outside because she didn’t even want to hurt an insect. Both parents gave interviews — starting with ABC — about their daughter’s achievements in the classroom and soccer field.

“Amanda’s mom and dad were untiring in their willingness to do whatever I recommended,” Marriott said.

Early on, Marriott decided that the national TV news magazine shows would be the best vehicle. The format allowed for in-depth investigations and brought credibility to the family’s case.

“The news magazines were key to getting the story out on who Amanda really was,” Curt Knox said. “That was a very smart maneuver on David’s part.”

Marriott believes the turning point in public perception came in February 2008, when “20/20” aired a program on Amanda Knox. ABC had sent its own expert to Perugia to examine the evidence, and the resulting show raised serious doubts about the case against her. Several months later, “48 Hours” did the same thing.

“‘48 Hours’ and ‘20/20’ were better partners for David Marriott and the Knox family than many other media outlets,” said Barry Mitzman, professor of communication at Seattle University. “You can’t put the family through hundreds of interviews, so you need to make good choices.”

Marriott continued to deal with all media surrounding the case, but he never thought it would last as long as it did. In December 2009, an Italian court found Amanda Knox guilty of Kercher’s murder. Marriott believed the closing arguments of her lawyers were strong, and felt as shocked as her family at the verdict.

“You can’t help but feel sunk,” Marriott said.

Marriott didn’t dwell on the disappointment. He continued to enlist supporters to rebut the verdict.

Finally, early this year, the court allowed an independent review of the DNA evidence used to convict Amanda Knox. As testimony began to emerge on mistakes made in collecting and analyzing the evidence, news stories began to shift significantly in her favor.

On Oct. 3, the guilty verdict was overturned, allowing Amanda Knox to fly home to Seattle.

“The truth was my mission,” Marriott said. “The DNA review got us there.”

Whether Marriott’s efforts, and shifting public sentiment, influenced the Italian courts is up for debate. Marriott says it’s very hard to say if the mission to correct misconceptions about Amanda made a direct impact on the outcome. He noted, though, that the judge in the appeals trial opened with the remark, “The only thing we know for sure in this case is that Meredith Kercher is dead.”

“That signaled that he wasn’t buying into a lot of what had happened in the earlier trial,” Marriott said.

Coming home

When Amanda and her family arrived the next day at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, a huge crowd greeted her. Bremner marvels at the fact that many broke into applause when Amanda walked into the room.

“They were clapping for her, and they were all press,” Bremner said. “What a change from four years ago.”

The Amanda Knox story may remain the most consuming case of Marriott’s career. It’s rare, Marriott said, to have this kind of public interest over such an extended period of time. As a result of the attention, Marriott has received inquiries from several other potential clients.

Marriott counts more than 6,700 Google News alerts for “Amanda Knox” that arrived over the four years. Most of those alerts contained links to three or more stories. And those are just the English language articles.

“There’s just so much hunger for information with this thing,” Marriott said.

Marriott has formulated a media plan for the days going forward, but he won’t discuss details. He plans to be ready if the prosecution appeals the acquittal. He also wants to help Amanda find the best vehicle to tell her story, and advise her on when to do so.

David Domke, who chairs the UW communication department, said there’s every chance to

make a positive impression when Amanda chooses to speak out.

“My sense is that they have the opportunity for a lot of goodwill toward Amanda,” Domke said. “The fact that that’s there after the incredibly negative coverage she initially received is just remarkable to me.”

And Kathleen Fearn-Banks, who teaches crisis communications at the UW, believes Knox could impart what she learned during her ordeal. For example, Marriott spoke to Fearn-Banks’ class about the risk of online postings that could be misconstrued. In Amanda Knox’s case, media people culled photos and writings from her MySpace account, including the “Foxy Knoxy” nickname.

“I’m hoping that the lessons our students learned may be taught by Amanda now in media appearances and perhaps writings she may do,” Fearn-Banks said.

And then there’s the curiosity factor.

“People around the world really want to know her story,” Bremner said.

If it’s up to Curt Knox, the 68-year-old Marriott will remain part of that effort until his daughter has followed this saga to the end.

“He’s not retiring,” Curt Knox said, “until he’s done with this.”

Amanda Knox timeline

Nov. 2, 2007: Meredith Kercher’s body found in Perugia apartment shared with Amanda Knox.

Nov. 6, 2007: Knox arrested.

Nov. 9, 2007: David Marriott hired.

Feb. 1, 2008: “20/20” story.

April 10, 2008: “48 Hours” story.

Jan. 16, 2009: Trial begins.

Dec. 4, 2009: Knox found guilty of murder and sexual assault; sentenced to 26 years.

Nov. 24, 2010: Appeal trial begins.

June 29, 2011: Expert discredits DNA evidence.

Oct. 3, 2011: Court clears Knox.

Oct. 4, 2011: Knox returns to Seattle.