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Recommended Citation

Office of University Communications, "GWU Alum to Represent Community in Miss North Carolina Scholarship Pageant" (2014). *Gardner-Webb NewsCenter Archive*. 1457.
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Office of University Communications

March 19, 2014

“Miss Shelby” Molly McKinney ('12) to Compete in Raleigh on June 21

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – The glimmer of her crown is eclipsed only by a gleam in her eye, and this 2012 Gardner-Webb alum is hoping the stars continue to align as she contends for a state title in June that could ultimately earn her a chance to compete in the Miss America pageant.

Molly McKinney, a May 2012 graduate of GWU and the current marketing director at the LeGrand Center (Shelby, N.C.), recently competed in a Miss America preliminary pageant, held in Shelby, N.C. on Feb. 22. When she was crowned Miss Shelby, she earned the opportunity to compete in the Miss North Carolina Scholarship Pageant, scheduled for June 21. The winner of that event will represent her state at the Miss America Scholarship Pageant, held in Atlantic City, N.J. in September. McKinney has witnessed firsthand what a difference a few weeks can make.

“My dad told me he’d heard of burning the candle at both ends, but he believed I had a three-wick candle,” she laughed. “In the matter of a week, I’ve inherited an insane calendar and four different moms! But I honestly wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Following a 40-year hiatus, the Miss Shelby preliminary pageant returned this year, offering local young women an opportunity to compete for the chance to represent their city and community at the highly competitive Miss North Carolina state pageant. Born and raised in Shelby, McKinney was still not 100-percent convinced that she wanted to participate.

“This was my first preliminary pageant and I was really on the fence on whether I was going to do it,” she shared. “I’ve done a lot of things that pageantry requires, but never participated in a Miss America organization pageant. Should I earn the title of Miss North Carolina, I’ll be heading to Miss America!”

Prior to taking part in the Miss Shelby pageant, McKinney’s only other pageant experience was as an undergraduate student at Gardner-Webb, where she joined roughly a dozen other girls and competed for the title of Miss Gardner-Webb. Although she serves as dance instructor for Step N Out Dance Productions in Shelby, McKinney is the first to acknowledge that she is far from the “pageant” type.

“I am so much more comfortable playing in the dirt on the softball field. In high school, my friends convinced me to try cheerleading and dance and I discovered a love and passion for both,” she reflected. “I really felt like being a student at GWU and being on the cheerleading team really prepared me to embrace the variety of different people that I will ultimately meet on my journey to Miss North Carolina.”

She surprised the judges of the Miss Shelby contest with the piece she performed for the talent portion of the competition. “The dance studio was all over my application, and was obviously an important part of my life,” McKinney explained. “One judge wanted to know why I wasn’t going to showcase my dance talent. The obvious answer for me was, ‘I don’t want to be predictable. You’re asking me the question because that is what you expect from me and I don’t want you to have preconceived notions about what I’m going to do before I do it.’ I told the judges I planned to ‘wow’ them with something they were not expecting. And I believe I did that.”

Instead of offering a dance solo, McKinney took the stage and sang the Italian operatic piece, “Se i Miei Sospiri.” She gives credit to former Gardner-Webb University voice professor Dr. Susan Ali for the classical training that allowed her to perform such a challenging piece with confidence.

“I spent two semesters learning the classical aspect of music that I had never had the opportunity to concentrate on before,” McKinney offered. “I developed a real appreciation and voice maturity by studying with Dr. Ali. Honestly, when I sang that piece at the pageant, I think my supporters were shocked. They had no idea I could sing opera.”

In the Miss America Pageant Organization, contestants must actively work in their communities to raise awareness and offer service opportunities on an issue of their choice. For McKinney, deciding to focus on children’s homes in North Carolina was almost a foregone conclusion.

“Growing up, my mom was always sort of an easy target for me. If I couldn’t get something from my dad, I always asked my mom,” she admitted. “I never understood why she would give in so easily. When I got older, I understood that she didn’t have a lot growing up. She grew up in a children’s home and wanted to make sure I had what I needed. She wanted me to have the things that she didn’t have while she was growing up.”

She continued, “That translated into the perfect platform to raise awareness for children’s homes. She had four sisters and they all went to different homes after their mom passed away. We recently were able to connect with all of the siblings and I met my aunt for the first time. She has two girls about my age, and we look exactly alike! That meant so much to me and I want it to mean something to other people too.”

Due to her family's relevant experiences with children's homes, McKinney understands the importance of establishing a sense of normalcy within the lives of the children in protective custody. "These kids don't have the same opportunities and the same freedoms that a lot of us take for granted," she shared. "I want to help them have a voice. I want to be a mentor to them and help guide them through one of the most difficult times of their lives when they don't have their parents to turn to."

Over the coming weeks, McKinney will begin intensive training and practice sessions to refine her skills and ensure that she well-prepared for the state pageant competition in June. She hopes to communicate with her hometown community by utilizing social media platforms including Facebook and Twitter. For now, she is thrilled with the way she—and the return of the local preliminary pageant—has been embraced by the city and county she calls home.

"I have really felt the support of the community," she acknowledged. "I've been well-received and I'm really enjoying all of the messages and encouragement. People have been very warm about it and I think they are also really excited."

Although McKinney already earned a four-year degree at GWU, she received a significant amount of scholarship money when she won the "Miss Shelby" title. She is hoping to start graduate school by the fall of 2015.

"Gardner-Webb is my home. It became my nucleus," she said. "I found home in friends; I found home in coaches; I found home in professors. Even if my ideal program doesn't open up in 2015, Gardner-Webb is where I'm coming."

Listen to the WGWG.org interview with Molly McKinney:

Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University blends a liberal arts core curriculum with more than 55 major and minor professional programs of study, a comprehensive academic experience that flows from our Christian commitment to intellectual freedom, service and leadership.