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Champion on a Roll as Ms. Wheelchair NC 2012

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Office of University Communications

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BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. — Hairspray, evening gowns, spray tans, and bathing suits. These items usually come to mind when people think of pageants. Take away the mascara and blush and you're left with a handful of women with kind hearts and dreams of world peace. Now imagine these women without the ability to walk. For Kristian Champion, a Gardner-Webb alumni and Ms. Wheelchair North Carolina, this scenario goes beyond imagination. It is real, and it has made a tremendous impact on her life.

Champion was born with spina bifida, a congenital condition that causes an underdevelopment of the spinal column. The disorder can cause neurological complications or, as in Champion's case, physical ones.

"I don't really consider spina bifida a disability," Champion said. "I was born with it and I don't know anything else besides having it. The challenges that I've had really haven't been challenges, but continuations of life. I'm truly blessed. I wasn't supposed to live to see age one, let alone age 21. I've accomplished so much in my life."

One of her latest accomplishments is becoming first runner-up in the 2013 Ms. Wheelchair America. According to the organization's website, its purpose is to "promote the achievements, as well as the needs of, people with mobility impairments." The contestants must also be at least 21 and rely fully upon their wheelchairs for transportation.

Champion was chosen to represent North Carolina because of her strong academic drive and her active role in her community. Through New Century Scholars, a program that offers college opportunities to promising students starting as early as middle school, Champion was able to take both college and high school courses at the same time. She managed to finish her high school classes by 10th grade, and received her associate of arts degree at age 18, just two days after receiving her high school diploma.

"I was at school from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., and I didn't get holidays off because I had to go to class. I had everything on my mind at all times. I had to have the will to drive," she reflected

Although she finished all of her college courses early, she decided to attend Gardner-Webb University for two years, graduating in 2011. "I loved it there," she said. "I tried to take classes to stay but I didn't have any classes left to take!"

She may not have been able to stay long, but her impression still remains. She managed to get classrooms remodeled, elevators put in, sidewalks redone, and much more to better conditions for the disabled community. Her proactivity was hardly unnoticed. She was soon receiving suggestions to try out for Ms. Wheelchair North Carolina.

“I never saw myself doing pageants. I don’t do glitz and glam,” Champion said. But after giving the pageant a second look, she realized that glitz would have nothing to do with it. “Ms. Wheelchair America isn’t based on looks,” she continued. “It’s all about public speaking and how you can communicate with your community on behalf of the disabled.”

This excited her. She tried out for Ms. Wheelchair North Carolina 2012 in March and won. “It was my first time being involved in anything like it. I was amazed.”

She went on to compete for Ms. Wheelchair America in Rhode Island, along with contestants from 30 states total. “When you have so many wheelchairs, it’s so hectic!”

To prepare for the pageant, Champion was able to take training classes such as self-defense, dance, and social networking. She left the sessions feeling empowered, confident. The event proved to be more than she could have imagined.

Women of varying disabilities and stories joined Champion on the stage. Some of them had become paralyzed from epidurals during childbirth or from being abused by their husbands. This was eye opening for her.

“I am so grateful that I have the ability to dance in my chair. I can even dance out of it with crutches. These women can’t dance at all, yet they held no animosity towards the people that put them in the chair. It’s something I can’t even imagine, yet something that I hold a lot of respect for.”

“The event was truly a humbling experience,” Champion continued. “The chairs really brought us together.” The girls weren’t focused on who would win. “When Ms. Texas won, you couldn’t find a single dry face in that room. I couldn’t stop smiling.”

Champion wishes that the pageant could have been televised worldwide so that others could have experienced how amazing the event actually was.

Although Champion is not allowed to compete in the pageant again, she is able to keep her title, sash, and crown. Her position has already opened the doors for a number of opportunities, including taking Ms. Wheelchair America’s place if she’s too busy or not available to show up for an event.

Her most recent invitation involves partaking in a roll-a-thon put on by the Spina Bifida Association in Washington D.C. this spring. She’ll be able to wear her sash and act as a role model for others in the event. Champion proves that those with disabilities are perfectly able to do anything, and sometimes more than those without disabilities.

Through faith and hard work, Kristian Champion has been able to live up to her positive name. “Whatever I’m doing right with God,” she said, “He’s putting me on the right path. Whenever I went through something in the past, I always knew it was going to be okay.”

Although Champion recognizes how cliché it is for a pageant contestant to talk about world peace, she claims this is something she really wants. “If I can share my peace with others, they can take that peace and pass it on. Hopefully it reaches the world.”

For more information on Champion’s experience, visit mswheelchairnc.org or facebook.com/MsWheelchairNC2012KristianChampion.