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Pageant Winner Trades Obstacle for Opportunity



Office of University Communications

June 30, 2011

Miss South Carolina International, Chelsea Gregory, Uses Her Past as a Platform for Service.



One of Gardner-Webb senior Chelsea Gregory's dreams came true this spring, when she won the Miss South Carolina International crown.

Having competed in pageants on and off since age 6, the Pittsburgh, Pa. native admits her passion for the stage as part of the allure for pageants: "I've been dancing and cheerleading since I was little, so being on stage is always a thrill." But what made the victory particularly special—and what has characterized her tenure as Miss South Carolina International—is her platform: a transformative message of hope born out of her own childhood struggle.

When Gregory was in the fourth grade, she began having trouble in school. Communicating the information she'd learned became increasingly difficult, and completing tests on time seemed impossible. Routine homework assignments became daunting tasks that kept her occupied for hours on end. Frustrated and exhausted, her struggle began to take a psychological toll. "I mean, I really grew up thinking I must be stupid or something," she remembers.

Gregory's concerned parents arranged for her to visit a specialist, who confirmed that she had Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and a processing disorder. For two years, her school system in Pittsburgh, Pa., worked to provide the support she needed to succeed in the classroom, but she says all that changed in middle school.

"Middle school is already an awkward and embarrassing time, but for me it was excruciating. I was too embarrassed to raise my hand to ask to go to my locker, let alone to ask for extra time on tests or extra help," she remembers. "My school also experienced funding cuts that made it impossible for teachers and counselors to provide the resources to help students with disabilities, like me. By the seventh grade, I was told to fend for myself."

During middle and high school, Gregory's guidance counselors told her that she couldn't hope to receive assistance for her disability in college, that she should be content with average work (despite her above average effort), and that she should just try harder. "It's like they thought my struggle was a joke." Chelsea insists that were it not for the constant love and support of her parents, she would never have maintained her self-esteem.

In her junior year of high school, Gregory had new testing done, and the specialists discovered something that changed her self-concept completely. "Of course, I still had ADD, and they discovered processing and reading disorders, but the tests also showed that I had an

IQ of 120. That's just a step below genius! It just proved to me that I wasn't stupid at all."

After high school, Chelsea's parents moved to Tega Cay, S.C., and Chelsea discovered Gardner-Webb University. She says she fell in love with the campus, the small class sizes, and the kindness of Gardner-Webb's people. She also quickly discovered that, despite what her school counselors had told her, Gardner-Webb's Noel Program for Students With Disabilities offers tremendous resources to help students succeed academically and socially, no matter their disability. A public relations major and Spanish minor, Chelsea now serves as a Spanish tutor and a mentor through the Noel Program for other students with disabilities.

When she decided to compete in the Miss South Carolina International Pageant, Gregory says her platform choice was a no-brainer. "Honestly, I've always known I was going to be an advocate for students with ADHD and other learning disabilities. When I was struggling, I always thought in the back of my mind that I'd like to help others who were struggling too. Many of them faced the same challenges at school, without the support from their families that I had. So this is just something that's close to my heart."

Gregory started "Refocus: ADHD Awareness," a website platform designed to raise awareness about the plight of students with ADHD. Her website offers a summary of her story, as well as information about her Miss South Carolina International experience. More importantly, though, it offers resources and tips for students with ADHD. "One of my biggest messages is self-advocacy," Gregory says. "Kids need to know that it's okay to speak up, to ask for extra help or for more time on tests. They need to know that they're not stupid."

As the Miss South Carolina International Queen, Gregory has shared her encouraging message with kids all over the state of South Carolina. She advocates for increased funding to support teacher training in the schools, so that "teachers can learn how to serve all of their students, not just those in the mainstream." She also calls for increased parental awareness and support for kids who are struggling. "Doing this pageant and winning the crown has offered me so many professional opportunities already," Gregory says. "But even more importantly, it's given me the chance to make a difference, and I'm excited to seize that opportunity."

On July 29-30, Gregory will travel and compete as the S.C. representative in the Miss International pageant in Chicago, where she will share her platform on the national stage. Ultimately, she hopes to take her message to Capitol Hill, and to be a catalyst for legislation that will make an impact she hopes will "last forever."

You can learn more about Chelsea's platform, "Refocus: ADHD Awareness," at her website, misssouthcarolinainternational.com. For more information about the Miss International pageant system, visit miss-international.us/pageant.php.