



Conservationist crowned Mrs. West Virginia, will compete nationally next month

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BECKLEY, W.Va. -- Marty Walker has always been more comfortable in a pair of jeans and work boots than a pageant gown and tiara.

But that didn't stop the 30-year-old conservation specialist from Meadow Bridge, Fayette County, from recently being crowned Mrs. West Virginia.

"I'm pretty sure I'm not the type of person you'd think of walking across a pageant stage," Walker said. "I grew up running around in the woods looking for wild mushrooms, gardening with my family and raising farm animals."

Walker, who has worked for West Virginia Conservation Agency for two years, is stationed in the Southern Conservation District. She oversees thousands of dollars in agricultural projects for WVCA each year in Wyoming, McDowell, Mercer, Summers, Fayette and Raleigh counties. She said she decided to pursue the title because it was a way to champion her beloved home state.

"I wanted to be a spokesperson for West Virginia and promote positive local industries like agriculture, our state's heritages of natural resources and tourism. I wanted to express to many the importance of influencing others to pursue their goals and ambitions."

As part of her job, Walker regularly helps farmers put together plans for their farms that focus on a conservation practice emphasis. The plans help safeguard natural resources, but they also tend to boost the farmer's bottom line, either making or saving them money. Walker's platform focuses on agriculture and conservation as well. She said she knew she had a winning message during her interview with pageant judges when one judge asked her why she would be proud to be from southern West Virginia.

Joblessness has skyrocketed in her region, which is also being ravaged by a prescription drug abuse epidemic. It's not easy to see the positives, but Walker doesn't hesitate to list her reasons for staying.

"It is about family roots, loving what you do and carrying on for the future of West Virginia. We cannot do that if everyone leaves"

As she began to discuss her love of everything outdoors and her personal contribution to the state, her plan to encourage others she saw smiles fighting their way onto the judges' faces.

"I could see that my message was getting across," she said.

She knows all too well about the challenges of the region, however. The judges asked questions about the region's struggles and how she could be a positive image.

"I am close to several people who have struggled with addiction," she said. "I feel like it's not just the drug for so many people, nor the person, but the state of the mind – the hopelessness, the despair and the struggle to find a job.

"These are very sad times for our state and the economy, and the drug epidemic the way it is," she continued, "but I see hope for West Virginia thru means of advocating our natural resources we have in place, in our agricultural lands we need to emphasize and encourage a market for and in promotion of our vast state parks. Locally grown foods are becoming a massive trend and this is where West Virginia has a niche opportunity through a community base. We must take a stand for conserving these resources. We are No. 1 nationally for small, family-owned farms. Our women in agriculture also take statistical national recognition. We obviously have people who love the land."

"West Virginia, conservation and agriculture go directly hand in hand and I feel that every day I help maintain that bridge between soil and water vitality and the farmer's ability to uphold their way of life" she said.

She often refers to a quote by conservationist Peter Seligmann: "The only way conservation can work is if it is seen as part of the fabric of the growth of human society."

As a representative of the state, she plans to focus on inspiring women of all ages through the pageant circuit to pursue either higher education, a trade of their desire or a dream of taking a stage and following their dream.

"I think it begins with encouraging youth to dedicate to their surroundings and what they can make out of their lifestyle, not focus on the obstacles," she said.

She has been in pageants before, but emphasizes that she is no veteran of the stage. When she was a high school senior, the town voted for her as homecoming queen. The title also required that she compete in the West Virginia Association of Fairs and Festivals pageant at the Charleston Civic Center.

"This is a huge pageant for teens in West Virginia. Most of the other girls had come through preliminaries to get to that point, but I was just homecoming queen," she said with a laugh. "My mom went with me and I was absolutely terrified. It was culture shock because we were so far out of our element. Here are professionals with coaches and choreographers and we show up with one little bag and a homecoming sash," she said.

"I was like, 'I never want to do this again' because it was so intimidating."

Then, last year something changed for Walker. She started to see pageants differently as she befriended a former Mrs. West Virginia, Kristi Atha-Rader.

Rader, who owns her own business, Fit For A Queen Formalwear in Beckley, and is the CEO of Rainelle Medical Center also continues to give back to her community in Fayette County. Kristi is a volunteer in the school system, Oak Leaf Festival director and many other public service affiliations. Walker started doing volunteer formal wear prom and bridal modeling for Rader's shop as a fun way to gain experience and guide self-esteem in younger girls.

"I started to think, 'I can do this, I can overcome the fear and achieve this inner dream,'" Walker said.

So, she decided to participate in the competition last year. She received third runner-up at the state pageant.

"Basically I was the nice person," she said laughing. "I was lost but it was a learning experience trying to prepare and keep up. But I began to think, 'Wait a minute. I was a nervous wreck and I didn't know what I was doing, and I still came in third. Last year, after that pageant I started the very next day. It was one year of exercising, personal fitness goals, practicing public speaking and methods of interviewing, preparing my wardrobe over time and getting myself ready to take the stage, prepared.

"I thought 'I can do this. I want to do this. I want to represent West Virginia,'" she added.

Next month, she will head to Las Vegas for the Mrs. America Pageant. She plans to carry her love of West Virginia, nature, conservation and farming with her.

Even if she isn't crowned at the event, she's perfectly happy returning home to a job and a state that she loves.

"I look forward to my reign all year as Mrs. West Virginia America. It is about role modeling and making a difference," Walker said. "Not everyone has the pleasure of coming to work, jumping in a vehicle and driving out to something that just makes your heart sing," she said. "I look forward to coming to work every day."

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The Mrs. America Pageant is a competition for married women throughout the United States. One contestant from each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia compete. They range in age from their 20s to 50s and must first win at the state level. The winner goes on to compete in the Mrs. World pageant.

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The West Virginia Conservation Agency is a state government agency responsible for promoting and protecting the state's land, water and other natural resources. It is charged with the operation and maintenance of the state's 170 small watershed flood-control dams, and assists agriculture producers who wish to implement conservation best management practices on their farms. It operates on a voluntary, not regulatory, approach.