

Life

Ashton Haywood: Alum brings awareness to local backpack program with Mrs. America Congeniality win

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For the first time in 13 years, an Arkansas contestant brought home an award from the Mrs. America Pageant.

Ashton Haywood entered the pageant wanting a platform to advocate for her students at STEAM Nettleton elementary. She started by competing in Mrs. Arkansas, winning there, then being crowned Mrs. Congeniality America 2026.

“It meant so much to me,” Haywood said. “I won the 50th Mrs. Arkansas and got Miss Congeniality at the 50th (Mrs. America), and it was the first time it was a unanimous vote in 50 years. I’ve never been so excited. I’ve never been so shocked in my life.”

Before she ever thought about competing in pageants, Haywood attended Arkansas State University for her collegiate career.

Haywood received both her undergraduate degree and master’s at Arkansas State University, one of only 17 people in the state to have a Master’s degree in Art Education. She was a member of Zeta Tau Alpha’s pledge class 2014 and president of the archery club, before she helped to register it as a club sport at A-State.

Haywood even returns as an alumna to campus for archery.

“ASU is a community, and that’s why, even as an alumni, I keep coming back and coaching,” Haywood said. “This is a community, and I love it, and I keep coming back. It definitely set a core foundation for a community experience for me.”

But now, she teaches elementary school art where she sees her students struggle for basic necessities. Arkansas is the number one state for families with food and material insecurities.

“I was trying to figure out a way to get resources to our kids like food and clothes and toothpaste and toothbrushes and just basic necessities. I kind of did it just to bring attention to these kids more than it was attention to me,” Haywood said.

Nettleton elementary’s social worker, Vera Leath, said the backpack program had been going on for years before Leath arrived at the school, but it was something Haywood wanted to help with and get involved in.

Haywood’s involvement started after she showed Leath her class project: tie-dying socks then handing them out.

“She can find resources, and she’s an advocate for these kids. She loves the kids, but she especially wants to help

the little ones,” Leath said. “She always comes to me and asks, ‘What can we do?’ Or ‘I’ve thought of this idea. Can we do this? Or how can I help you?’”

While helping students at her school was on Haywood’s radar, participating in pageants was not.

However, Haywood was talking to her friends one day about how the backpack program had been struggling. Haywood’s friends proceeded to convince her to go for the Mrs. Arkansas pageant, even though she was nervous at first, not knowing if she got stage fright or not.

“So I did, and then I won Mrs. Arkansas,” Haywood said. “Didn’t realize that it was like a big one.”

After winning Mrs. Arkansas, Haywood thought that was it and she wasn’t going to do another pageant; she didn’t even realize there was a Mrs. America division to compete for.

However, after she realized, her cousin, Chesney Monroe, helped convince Haywood to go for one more pageant.

Monroe also participated in the Mrs. America organization, being crowned both Mrs. Texas in 2018 and Miss Oklahoma for America Strong in 2019. Monroe also placed sixth at Mrs. America after being crowned to represent Texas.

“I talked to her (Monroe), and she said ‘it is the most rewarding thing you’ll ever do, they care about you. They care about family. This organization helps so much with platform, and if that was what you went for for Mrs. Arkansas, it’s only going to amplify when you go to nationals because people are going to see you,’” Haywood said. “She encouraged me. She texted me backstage. Every doubt, every worry I had.”

The two pageants were drastically different. For example, Mrs. Arkansas was only one day whereas Mrs. America was almost two weeks.

Haywood said the Mrs. America process was draining but extremely rewarding.

“I slept four hours every night. I got food poisoning for two days. I got so dehydrated that I ended up getting a kidney infection. Someone stepped on my toes at rehearsal in a stiletto, so I have a fractured pinky toe. I didn’t get to talk to my family for 12 days because we were so busy, I couldn’t get on the phone, and I’d do it all over again,” Haywood said.

After Haywood fractured her toe, during the swimsuit portion of the pageant, she stumbled on stage due to the pain in her pinky. Once she reached backstage, fellow

contestants were on her, trying to help ease the pain in whatever way they could before the next portion of the pageant.

Haywood said that, like being in a sorority, being part of pageants fostered a sisterhood between the contestants.

“That support and love from other women and other communities is just kind of like the key to thriving. You can never do anything on your own,” Haywood said. “It is a sisterhood. It’s like a sorority. It’s like this college. It’s like this town. Like you’re never truly alone. You have support. You have a corner. You have love.”

Her closest friends and those who supported her throughout her Mrs. America process were not surprised to hear about her Mrs. Congeniality win on the national level.

Melissa Gibbs, a professor in the art and design department at A-State, said Haywood was one of the most loyal and kindhearted people she’s ever met and was extremely excited by her win.

“She is so friendly and so welcoming to people, very hospitable,” Gibbs said. “So not surprised at all, You can always make a connection with Ashton. She’s always going to



PHOTO COURTESY OF ASHTON HAYWOOD

Artist: Ashton Haywood poses in downtown Jonesboro, showcasing her connection to art. Haywood is an art teacher at the STEAM Nettleton elementary school and earned her Master’s in Art Education at Arkansas State.

make you feel welcome and comfortable.”

Haywood has since returned to Nettleton to teach her art classes and publish two children’s books, “The Kindness Crown” and “Mrs. Ashton Wears Many Crowns.” Half of the proceeds from each book will go to support the Nettleton Public Schools

Backpack Program.

While Haywood inspired her kids at school with her pageants and her work within the program, she hopes to inspire those who may be wary to try new things.

“Don’t have regrets. That’s one of my biggest things,” Haywood said. “Just do it. It is okay when you’re a student

to be selfish with certain life experiences.”

The backpack program is always looking for more supplies for their students, whether it be hygiene, child-accessible food, or clothes. Donations can be taken to the front office of any Nettleton school at any time.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ASHTON HAYWOOD

Contestant: Ashton Haywood being crowned as Mrs. Arkansas at the close of the July pageant. She originally joined the pageant as a way to bring awareness to her elementary school’s backpack program.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ASHTON HAYWOOD

Archer: Ashton Haywood poses with her bow and arrow. Haywood joined archery by accident during her time at Arkansas State, became the president of the club and worked to turn it into a club sport by the end of her time at A-State.