

Moraga's Mary Beth Ward sees Miss USA as platform for her passion

By Lou Fancher
Correspondent

Posted: 01/05/2012 02:35:26 PM PST

Updated: 01/05/2012 02:35:27 PM PST

Mary Beth Ward says she was a chubby, taller-than-average kid who came home from elementary school in tears nearly every day. When she was in third grade, she was voted "Not Pretty Enough To Be Our Friend" by a group of her peers.

With that particular cruelty specific to young girls, her classmates inadvertently kick-started Ward's lifelong mission -- to prove them wrong and to save other girls from years of self-hatred and doubt.

Today, the 19 year-old Saint Mary's College freshman, a resident of Moraga since the age of 3, is using her position as Miss Moraga Valley to champion her cause. She will compete for the Miss California USA title this weekend in Indian Wells, and with other contestants will participate in the Miss USA contest later this year.

"The Miss USA is different than the Miss America organization," Ward is quick to point out. "Miss USA focuses on charity work. Each girl is expected to have a passion that they run on."

Ward's passion is promoting confidence and strength in young women.

"I've been so torn down by this, so if they see me and see I can get through it, maybe they will think they can do it, too," she says of the young girls she hopes to inspire.

But a visit to the pink Miss USA homepage and the suggestive poses of many of the candidates begs the question "Is this really the best way to encourage young girls to value themselves for something other than appearance?"

"There

are people like Miss Oakland who are bringing the word out about violence against women," Ward argues. "Sure, there are women who want to do this for the beauty part, but I want to use this as something greater than being in a pageant. I want to use it as a platform."

Her foundation -- the bedrock from which she operates, she said -- was built on the sturdy advice she received from her mother after that fateful third grade vote.

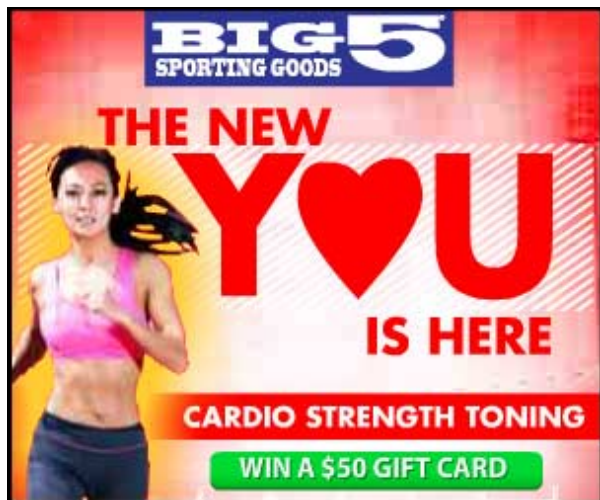
"She told me, 'You have the kindest heart; one day you will use this experience to help other people who are having the same issue,'" Ward remembers.

Not long after being cast aside, Ward began to play basketball, which fortified her body and provided a new perspective.

"I was still worried I'd end up with no friends, because everyone is so clique-y in this community and the girls are so judgmental," she states -- a claim she insists is as true today as it was when she was in elementary and middle school.

That is why she is determined to hold a confidence-building workshop for girls age 8 through 15 at Moraga's New Rheem Theatre in the early spring. She is lining up speakers and working with SMC's Women's Center to prepare for what she refers to as the "A Beautiful You" conference. Profits from the event will be donated to the theater's ongoing sound upgrade projects.

Although there is a fee of almost \$1,000 for the



Print Powered By FormatDynamics™

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

ContraCostaTimes.com

pageant that candidates are directed to cover by collecting sponsorships, Ward has paid for hers on her own. She is directing her further fundraising efforts toward supporting either the Girl Scouts or the Sister-to-Sister Summit, a program coordinated by the American Association of University Women to hear in girls' voices about the issues that affected their lives, and for girls to help their younger peers (a summit takes place each year in Lamorinda, usually in March).

Ward said her responsibilities are to the local community, and that she is willing to speak for any organization that helps girls.

"I have to get the message out. Being athletic and being with my mom gave me the confidence, but (my physical form) could be gone tomorrow. I would be doing this no matter what was happening in my life."

Her advice for young girls is to "get involved in sports or something that makes you forget the haters." For parents, she says, "Just be there and help them out. Tell them what my mom told me: Beauty is on the inside."



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™