

ARTS & LIVING



Ali Ingersoll, 37, of Raleigh, works to help people with disabilities navigate the world of health insurance so they can be self-advocates. She is the 2023 Ms. Wheelchair America.

Raleigh native Ali Ingersoll wins Ms. Wheelchair America

BY KRISTEN JOHNSON
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As an ambitious business woman, Ali Ingersoll never saw herself as a person who would ever compete in a pageant.

However, the competition to win Ms. Wheelchair America is not your average contest.

For the last 50 years, this competition has redefined what it means to be traditional, diverse and inclusive because beauty, like success, has many different faces.

To win Ms. Wheelchair America, contestants are evaluated on their advocacy, achievements and presentation. The crown holder becomes a spokesperson for people with disabilities.

Ingersoll, of Raleigh, is now that crown holder, having won the Ms. Wheelchair America competition Aug. 21. She competed against 21 women from



Ali Ingersoll, pictured here in 2020, is the new Ms. Wheelchair America. The crown holder becomes a spokesperson for people with disabilities.

SEE INGERSOLL, 2C

Raleigh doctor stars on new TLC series on hair loss

BY COLLEEN HAMMOND
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As a child, Dr. Angie Phipps never suspected her father's hair was artificial, until one night, sitting with him watching TV, she noticed him peel all his hair off his head and scratch his bald scalp.

"Daddy!" she exclaimed. "You gotta teach me how to do that."

Decades later, Phipps works as a hair restoration surgeon in Raleigh, and her work is now the subject of TLC's newest show, "Bad Hair Day."

Over six episodes, "Bad Hair Day" will follow three medical hair regrowth and restoration professionals as they attempt to treat difficult hair loss cases from across the country. It premieres Wednesday at 10 p.m. and also stars Dr. Meena Singh and Dr. Isha Lopez.

Phipps, from Raleigh, specializes in hair restoration surgery, a procedure that transplants hair from elsewhere on the body (typically the scalp) to areas affected by balding and hair loss.

Her work can be transformative for those, like her father, who deal with the devastating impacts of hair loss.

"He suffered in silence for 30 years," Phipps said.

Witnessing her father's struggle first hand, Phipps was inspired, and motivated, to dedicate her life to restoring patients' hair. Her father eventually became one of those patients.

"I put you through med school?" Phipps recalls her father telling her. "You better find a way to put hair on my head."

As her training progressed, Phipps was eventually able to restore her father's hair, who was overjoyed at the results of his procedure.



Angie Phipps

SEE DOCTOR, 3C

R&B Hall of Fame headed to small Mississippi Delta town

BY MICHAEL GOLDBERG
Associated Press/Report for America

JACKSON, MISS.

A small town in the Mississippi Delta that has ties to the civil rights movement will soon be home to the National Rhythm and Blues Hall of Fame.

Project planners hope to finish building the facility in the town of Marks in two or three years, Velma Wilson, director of economic tourism and development for Quitman County, told The Associated Press on Tuesday. Marks is the county seat of Quitman County and has a population of fewer than 2,000 people.

The project is the culmination of a 50-year effort to build a hall of fame for R&B musicians such as James Brown, Aretha Franklin and B.B. King.

"There is no other hall of fame in the world that is primarily focused and dedicated to the history of R&B music on a national scale," LaMont Robinson, CEO of the NRBHF, said in a news release. "My vision to build a hall of fame to honor R&B and its contributions to

civil rights, America, and the entire world is something that I don't take lightly."

Robinson founded the hall of fame in 2010. Since 2013, it has inducted over 200 artists.

Marks appealed to Robinson due to its civil rights history. Martin Luther King Jr. chose the town in 1968 as the starting point for his Poor People's Campaign, which demanded economic justice for poor Americans of all backgrounds. On March 31, 1968, in what would be his final Sunday sermon before his assassination, King described the poverty-stricken families he encountered in Marks.

"I was in Marks, Mississippi, the other day, which is in Quitman County, the poorest county in the United States. And I tell you I saw hundreds of Black boys and Black girls walking the streets with no shoes to wear," King said at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. "I saw their mothers and fathers ... They raised a little money here and there; trying to get a little food to feed the children; trying to teach them a little something."

The conditions in the cotton



Rendering by A2H Engineers, Architects, Planners via AP

Organizers are aiming to complete building the National Rhythm and Blues Hall of Fame in Marks, Miss., in two or three years. The project is the culmination of a 50-year effort to build a hall of fame for R&B musicians.

fields of Quitman County and other parts of the Mississippi Delta were the environment in which early civil rights activists and field workers produced music that's now identified as blues, gospel and R&B, project planners said.

"It was this cultural and musical phenomenon that provided the basis for the prodigious economic success and profits of the U.S. music industry worldwide," Wilson stated in planning documents.

As of 2020, Quitman County had one of the 20 lowest

median income levels of all counties in the country, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

"The Hall of Fame will be the catalyst to Delta tourism growth and opportunities, and a means to attract business and industry," said Democratic U.S. Rep. Bennie Thompson, who represents Quitman County.

The city of Marks donated 5 acres of land for the project.

According to an agreement reviewed by the AP, the Quitman County Economic Tourism and Development agency secured a \$500,000 appropri-

ation from the Mississippi Legislature for infrastructure related to the project. The agency also hopes to secure an \$11 million federal grant through the U.S. Department of Transportation to beef up development around the hall of fame.

"While there is significant energy and excitement in the project, it is also daunting for the QTED staff and will require multiple partnerships to succeed," the agency wrote in the agreement.

THE GOD SQUAD

How to care for ailing 90-year-old mother

BY RABBI MARC GELLMAN



“Thou shalt rise up before the hoary head, and honour the face of the aged: I am the LORD.” - Leviticus 19:32

Q: What happens when you just don't know what to pray for? My Mom is 90 and up until two months ago she was living alone in the home we grew up in, dressing herself, bathing herself, cooking herself delicious meals, walking with a

cane. She had to have fairly minor surgery which led to several other issues, and all resolved within two weeks of being admitted to the hospital. However, she has had a complete decline while in the hospital and after. Currently she is in a rehab facility. She's in a wheelchair, seems like she is experiencing the onset of dementia, and can't tend to herself.

My siblings and I are now faced with what our next steps are. Move to assisted living? Move to a nursing home? Go home with 24/7 care? Find other housing that can accommodate her needs? I know many people go through this, but I feel

like there is no good choice and whatever we choose will be the wrong one. If I was making this decision alone, it would be simpler for me, but my siblings and I decided long ago that we are in this together and we all need to be comfortable with Mom's care plan. I pray for guidance and the best possible outcome, but these choices keep going around in my head and there never seems to be a clear answer.

Decisions have always come easily to me. I'm in new territory here. What do I pray for? Thank you, I'm blowing in the wind! - *From D on Long Island*

A: Nobody is ready to become mom for their

mom. The decisions you and your family face now are hard because they test all of you to answer this impossible question: How do we repay mom's love for us? Love does not ask for repayment from the lover, but it demands repayment from the beloved. You are the beloved ones and your mom's last days are in your hands and in your hearts now.

The financial questions are not the most spiritually important, but they are the first questions. If none of you can have your mom in your home, then you must make provisions for her care at her home or in a facility where you can afford to provide her with both community and personal care. You must make a calendar to schedule regular visits from each of you, so the burden is equally shared.

Also, when you visit, have an agenda of stories. Tell your mom stories about her past and ask

her to share with you her memories. Just sitting with her is good, but not good enough. Try to get her technologically savvy enough to manage FaceTime calls. And finally, do not beat each other up over your supposed failings. You are doing the best you can just like your mom did every day of her life. God bless you all.

Q: I loved your recent column on signs. I have received many signs, clear signs, from my father who passed away 40 years ago, in his 50s, to aunts, uncles and even a friend's mother that wanted me to pass messages on to other family members or friends. I guess I'm an easy mark because I'm open to it!

You are so right when you say you can't force it, you can't pay for it, and it won't be on your timeline. It has been my experience that the messages will come when you are relaxed, least expecting it and when there is something that you or some-

one else needs to know. You just need to keep your mind open and trust the message will come.

A: Yes indeed, my dear D. I completely agree. You must be relaxed. Being tense and anxious makes you numb to the surprise of it all. You must also know that the sign or message is not God showing off. The sign is a message, and the message is something you need to know.

Usually it is a simple message but it is always a needed message: “I am OK. I love you. Pray for me.” That is the thing with signs and with faith as a whole. Faith is not so much about what we need to learn. Faith is about what we need to remember. ... The journey of our soul to God does not end at the grave. That is what Tommy taught me when he was alive and that is what Tommy taught me after he died.



Courtesy of Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation

Ali Ingersoll and her mother embrace after she is crowned the new Ms. Wheelchair America in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

FROM PAGE 1C

INGERSOLL

across the country.

“It was such a humbling experience to be with such incredible women,” she said.

Ingersoll, 39, first won the competition at the state level in North Carolina last year. This month, she took on the challenge to compete for the title over the span of six days in Grand Rapids, Michigan. This was the first year the competition was held in person since 2019.

Ingersoll's platform was an extension of her daily efforts to advocate for people with disabilities and help them navigate the often frustrating process of health insurance appeals.

“For the last 12 years, I have been fighting for medically necessary equipment that's constantly denied to many of us, that allow us not only to survive, but to thrive,” Ingersoll told *The News & Observer* in an interview. She has taken this fight to BlueCross BlueShield and other Medicaid and Medicare programs.

Some of this equipment includes electrical beds in hospitals, mattresses, seat elevators, shower chairs, and other things that are not considered medically necessary for people with disabilities, she said.

Ingersoll was 27 years old in 2010 when she broke her neck from a shallow water dive at her family home in the Bahamas. She is paralyzed from the chest down with little movement in her hands, she said.

“I taught myself how to write letters of medical necessity backed up by peer review articles,” Ingersoll said. Most recently, her step-by-step guide on how to maneuver the insurance appeals process was published on SPINALpedia, a social platform serving people with spinal cord injuries.

Now, as the winner of Ms. Wheelchair America 2023, Ingersoll's daily life will be packed with more traveling, speaking engagements and opportunities to build partnerships with corporations to make life more accessible and inclusive for people with all sorts of disabilities.

'I DON'T DO BEAUTY PAGEANTS'

Ingersoll's advocacy efforts started before she learned about the Ms. Wheelchair America competition. She was asked to represent North Carolina in the pageant by the executive director of the state's Spinal Cord Injury Association.

“I was hesitant because I was like, I don't do beauty pageants, I'm a business woman,” Ingersoll said with a laugh. “But she assured me it was advocacy so I said, ‘Let's go for it.’”

To enter the national competition, Ingersoll completed the 26-page application, which also required a two-minute long speech and an essay. Contestants must be state title holders and use a wheelchair for 100% of their daily lives, according to Ms. Wheelchair Amer-

ica's website.

Ingersoll already has a busy schedule. She works full-time as a day-trader and part-time with Open Inclusion, a non-profit organization that seeks to get employment and freelance opportunities for people with disabilities.

In May, Ingersoll worked with state Sen. Jay Chaudhuri to introduce legislation to get adaptive exercise equipment for long-term wheelchair users. The bill failed in the Senate but Ingersoll said she is still fighting to get it passed.

In her spare time, she runs the “Quirky Quad Diaries,” a blog about living with her disability and making the most “out of every situation whether that be intensely terrifying or insanely comical,” Ingersoll said.

Ingersoll spent most of her life in Europe and the Bahamas with her family. She came to live in downtown Raleigh six years ago after living in China, where she got extensive life-saving treatments after her accident. Ingersoll also met her husband in Raleigh in 2016.

Winning the title of Ms. Wheelchair America came during a significant time for Ingersoll, as Aug. 21 marked 12 years since her accident. On that day, when she jumped off the porch of her house into shallow water, Ingersoll ended up hitting sand and was unable to move.

“It took a herculean effort of 22 hours and multiple jets to get me over to the United States,” she said. “I have some upper body mobility like my upper arms but my triceps are paralyzed so I need full-time care.”

In her Facebook post celebrating her accomplishments, Ingersoll shared pictures of the moment she was injured, which she does each year.

“Thankfully, these photos don't elicit too much of an emotional response 12 years on, but I love them because if they make even one person stop to think about diving head first then that is a win for me,” she said.

DECIDING TO DO SOMETHING BETTER

One in four Americans, or 61 million people, have a disability that impacts their daily lives, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Since Ms. Wheelchair America was formed in 1972, there have been over 1,000 state titleholders. There have been representatives from 48 states and the District of Columbia. But now, the competition only has representatives from 21 states, according to Shelly Loose, the president of the national competition and former winner from Michigan.

The platforms women choose to compete on have been different every year, Loose said.

“There've been multitudes. They can be from higher education for people with disabilities, it can be adaptive sports, it can be architectural barriers, it can be reaching out to children to break the stigmas. It's a wide range,” she said.

Among the contestants at the Ms. Wheelchair America competition this year was a mother of four who worked in healthcare before her accident; a young woman born with

spina bifida; a wellness coach; a travel advisor; and a clinical scientist who volunteered at eight Olympics.

In addition to the national winner, there are four runners-up, and other winners including Miss Congeniality, Best Speech and a leadership award.

For six days of the competition, the contestants explored Grand Rapids, participated in workshops on leadership, self-care and advocacy and gave prepared speeches. There are also themed events in which the contestants need to dress up, Loose said.

“Everything we do during that week is really intentional,” Loose said. “They're out exploring the community but more so the community is seeing all these women in wheelchairs.”

The group also goes to the Gerald Ford Presidential Library and Museum, Loose said.

“I kind of connect that to Gerald Ford was sort of an accidental president, but when he did it, he did it with grace and honor and made a difference,” said Loose, who has been using a wheelchair for 35 years.

“It's like us with disabilities,” she said. “It's not like we choose to be disabled, but once we are, we make the best of it and decide to do something better.”

'WE EXIST'

Like Ingersoll, Loose said she wants to see the Ms. Wheelchair America competition get more national recognition and sponsorship. She said she also wants a competition in all 50 states.

One of the biggest sponsors is Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospital based in Grand Rapids. Last year the hospital stepped in to help move the traditionally in-person competition to a virtual platform for thousands of people to watch online, according to Chris Mills, a spokesman for the hospital.

“Having some strong national sponsors is a goal, because I think that we can get so much more done and accomplish all of our goals as far as the advocacy and training for the women,” Loose said. “If we had national sponsors, it would make things a lot easier for us.”

Ingersoll said one of her goals as Ms. Wheelchair America is building partnerships with corporations that can help the competition.

“Not just for women in wheelchairs, but for people with disabilities,” she said. “Because a lot of the women that I've built relationships with, they're all working on their respective advocacy platforms to make our world a little more inclusive.”

Loose said Ingersoll's platform on health care advocacy was particularly important, because insurance companies constantly deny people with disabilities the basic things they need for everyday use.

Insurance companies, though helpful for most people in their needs, don't cover everything a person might need to survive, Loose said.

“When I was first in a chair, the doctors got to tell the insurance companies what I needed, but now it's the insurance companies telling the doctors what I needed,” she said. “There's really a big gap.”

Loose said able-bodied people, or those who are not physically disabled, can join the efforts for a more inclusive world by paying attention to competitions like Ms. Wheelchair America and learning more about the disabled community.

“We exist and we've been around for 50 years and we're just a group of dedicated volunteers,” Loose said. “In those 50 years, we really have stuck to the original purpose of breaking barriers for people with disabilities. We've stayed true to the original focus and everyone can be an advocate.”

Ingersoll said she her first order of business is to continue educating the community about the issues people with disabilities face.

“Able-bodied people can get involved,” she said. “I think it's imperative for stakeholders and government leaders and advocates in the community to and take ownership for these very important issues.”