

MS. WHEELCHAIR VIRGINIA HAS 'UNSTOPPABLE IRON WILL'

Perspective paramount to car crash survivor



Varner's tattoo, like her attitude, is all about perspective, and she says 'it depends on how you look at' a tragedy.



PHOTOS BY PETER CIHELKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Ms. Wheelchair Virginia Vicki Varner, who takes cares of 1-year-old Graysen Ballhaus during the week and goes to school full time, was paralyzed in a December 2015 auto accident. In July, she will compete for the national title.

BY CATHY DYSON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

At first glance, the tattoo on Vicki Varner's forearm looks like a mishmash of capital letters, arranged in no particular order.

But a closer look shows an upside-down "P," backwards "E" and flipped "V" that work together with other letters to form the word "PERSPECTIVE."

The ability to decipher it "depends on how you look at it," Varner said, and that's exactly why she chose the body art.

Perspective has become a key part of her life.

"Sometimes, it's the only thing you have control over," she said last month,

while addressing the graduating class of Wilson Workforce and Rehabilitation Center in Fishersville.

The event marked the first time the Fredericksburg resident had appeared before a large crowd since being crowned Ms. Wheelchair Virginia in January. From her wheelchair, the 22-year-old,

who had been a standout softball player at Courtland High School in Spotsylvania County, described the curveball life had thrown at her.

Three years ago, she was in a Christmas Eve crash that left her paralyzed, without the use of legs that helped earn her an athletic scholarship to college. Not only did she have to accept the way her life had changed, but she also had to put it all in perspective.

"If I focused on everything my paralysis has taken away from me, I'd be a very unhappy girl," she told the group. "But I choose instead to look at everything I still do, and what I will do."

SEE WHEELCHAIR, D2

WHEELCHAIR

► FROM D1

'UNSTOPPABLE IRON WILL'

Varner is going to school full-time, taking online classes through John Tyler College. Her plan had always been to double-major in psychology and communications, but after the accident she decided she'd like to work as a trauma counselor with newly injured patients.

She takes care of a friend's active 14-month-old infant during the week, jokingly calling it a "practice run" before she has children of her own. (One of the first questions she asked after the accident was if she'd be able to have kids.) She and long-time boyfriend Tyler Thomas plan to marry in June 2020.

Varner also is in the midst of her reign as "Ms. Wheelchair," and she's traveling the state, sharing her platform about challenging society's standards about beauty, especially in terms of what people think when they hear the word "wheelchair."

"None of the adjectives include young, beautiful and able, so that is something that I really would like to change," Varner told Rick Sizemore, director of the Wilson center, during a podcast in March.

Sizemore was impressed by what he calls Varner's "unstoppable iron will." He believes she'll have even more to do after the national contest in July in Little Rock, Ark.

"Because of who she is and how she delivers her laser-focused message, we should not be at all surprised if we are referring to her as Ms. Wheelchair America sometime in the not-too-distant future," he said.

NEVER WALK AGAIN

In December 2015, Varner had just enjoyed her first semester of independence as a freshman at Missouri Valley College when she came home for the holidays. At her mother's house in Orange County, the family followed its Christmas Eve tradition of opening one present: pajamas.

After slipping into her flannel set, decorated with pink flamingos, Varner rode along with her brother, R.J., to let out a relative's dog, and to take home her boyfriend. It was foggy that night, and R.J. Varner missed a sharp curve on the winding road, about 5 miles from the home of their mother, Cheryl Varner.

His Ford Focus hit a tree, and the impact crushed



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Vicki Varner was paralyzed in a 2015 crash and since that time, she's learned to not look at what the injury took away, but all the opportunities she has left.



Varner says that being Ms. Wheelchair Virginia has given her 'a new meaning in life, bigger than myself.'

the car like an accordion, Vicki Varner recalled. Her brother and boyfriend were able to get out of the front seats, but she was in the back and couldn't move.

Her new pink jammies were stained with blood, and she felt like she had a ton of bricks on her legs.

On Christmas morning, doctors at VCU Medical Center in Richmond told her she had a complete spinal cord injury in her lower back and would never walk again. She cried, twice, over the news, then told herself that was enough.

It was time to get on with her life.

By the time she was transferred to Shepherd Center in Georgia for rehabilitation in early January, she was learning how to fend for herself and visiting new patients as a peer mentor.

"Although my body might be as broken as Humpty Dumpty, my fight and my spirit were not," she told the Wilson

center graduates, adding that she picked herself up and "rose to the phoenix that I am today."

That's another tattoo she's gotten since the accident: a phoenix feather and the words, "Twas the night before Christmas." Her brother has the same thing on his arm, and she believes it's helped him and the rest of her family to see her moving forward with her life.

'IT WILL GET DONE'

She won't lie. The thought of going from dirt and cleats to frilly gowns and tiaras made her apprehensive. But when Varner learned the Ms. Wheelchair Virginia program judges participants on how they plan to advocate for others, not how they look in a swimsuit, Varner wanted to be part of an effort that focuses on strong women making significant changes.

"Now, that is something I can get behind," she said. Varner plans to encour-

age gyms to purchase more equipment for people who don't have use of their lower bodies. She tries to work out regularly, believing fitness is even more important to a person after a spinal cord injury.

"It really helps with gaining more independence," Varner said. "The stronger you are, the more you're able to do for yourself and it helps with your psychological well-being."

She can feed, cook and take care of herself—and the child she babysits—in her Fredericksburg apartment that's compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The only thing she can't do is drive. She's nervous about operating the controls with her hands and admits there's a psychological fear of getting behind the wheel. But she hopes to cross off that task this year.

Emily McGrail, coordinator of the Ms. Wheelchair Virginia program, believes Varner will find the strength she needs, especially in her quest to reach out to others. McGrail also wore the Ms. Wheelchair crown and knows something about overcoming adversity.

She suffered with a tumor on her brain stem, harmful side-effects from radiation, then blinding headaches caused by fluid leaking into her spinal cord.

"Vicki possesses determination that reminds me of myself," McGrail wrote in an email. "We do not take 'no' for an answer, and when we put our minds toward doing something, it will get done."

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