

Miss Coweta: From tragedy to crowning triumph

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By Tamara Newell / tamara@newnan.com

When you first meet Rachel Thompson, you'd never imagine her experiencing childhood tragedy and loss.

Rather, you're greeted with a radiant smile and joyful energy.

Born and raised in Newnan, Thompson is a graduate of Northgate High School and is currently pursuing an elementary education degree at the University of West Georgia University.

Her youthful spirit is a perfect pairing for educating young minds. There's no doubt she'll excel in the classroom, but it won't solely rest on her ability to teach. Because of her own struggles at a young age, she's acutely tuned into the needs of children beyond learning.

Loss at a young age

Thompson said she had a happy childhood in Newnan, growing up in a historical farmhouse.

"It was built in 1914," she said. "It was really neat. I remember we had a birthday party for our house in 2014 when it turned 100 – it was so fun. We had pigs, ducks, chickens, bunnies, dogs, of course, and a cat. Growing up here was great."

Thompson kept busy playing with the animals, taking dance classes and riding four-wheelers.

Her love of children began young. Her mom operated a home-based child care center in their farmhouse.

"I was always around kids, and I loved hanging out with her day care," Thompson said. "I tried to help her out, but was probably more of a nuisance than a help."

Either way, her heart for helping children took root.

At 9 years old, while a student at Arbor Springs Elementary, tragedy came into Rachel's life. Her father died unexpectedly. Death, especially that of a parent, is a heavy weight for a young child to carry. Through the shock, grief and transition into a single-parent home, her mom was in lockstep with her through it all.

"My mom was a rock star," Thompson said. "I sing all my praises to her. ... She really supported me through everything."

Her mother's support, as well as her community at Arbor Springs Elementary, made all the difference. She experienced first hand how powerful a loving school community can be. Little did she know that the intersection of her childhood loss – met with loving support – would later serve as her guiding compass into adulthood.

"It was really hard to go back (to school after her father's death) but my teachers were awesome," Thompson said. "They were so sweet. All of my friends were very supportive. I had an amazing support system."

Two children in every classroom will lose a parent by the time they turn 18.

When childhood education comes to mind, we think of learning, making friends, growing responsibility and discovering passions. We don't think of wading through the depth of grief and loss.

The challenge of losing a parent is lifelong. With each stage of life, there are new obstacles and Thompson knows this firsthand.

From tragedy to crowning triumph

As she neared graduation from Northgate High School, it became clear college tuition would be Thompson's responsibility. She is a first-generation college student. She said her family is proud of her, but the path forward is one she's figuring out by herself.

With an eye to graduating debt free, her mom encouraged Thompson to apply for scholarships. She suggested looking for one awarded to children who'd lost a parent.

With some digging around, Thompson found one. She applied and was denied.

"I wanted so badly to share my story with someone," Thompson said. "But I didn't have that option."

Frustrated, she kept looking. That's when she discovered the Miss America scholarship organization.

Miss America, a long-standing national pageant, awards college scholarships to women at the local, state and national levels. Competing in the Miss America system has boded well for Thompson. In 2021, she held the title of Miss Coastal Empire. In 2022, she was crowned Miss Coweta County.

During her back-to-back reigns, Thompson has served her community in several areas. She's made multiple visits to spend time with children at the Summit Family YMCA, imparting a love of reading to young campers and lighting up the eyes and hearts of little girls at the Princess and Superhero Bash.

Through the Miss Georgia organization, she's shared her story with young women at Girls, Inc. in Columbus. With the Children's Miracle Network, Rachel helped raise money for toys and medically specific pajamas at Newnan Piedmont Hospital.

The Guardian Angel Scholarship Fund launches

While competing in the Miss America scholarship organization, each contestant chooses a platform, a cause they're committed to serving as a contestant and title-holder.

"I didn't really know what I wanted to do, but I knew I had to do something that meant a lot to me," Thompson said.

Having seen the lack of college scholarships for children who'd lost a parent, Thompson decided to create the Guardian Angel Scholarship Fund.

“As a 9-year-old little girl, I had no idea that anyone else was going through that,” she said. “It’s a topic no one talks about, and it’s really difficult to create those conversations. If those conversations aren’t being had, there’s no help that we can do. We can’t provide scholarships if we don’t know there’s a need. So I set out on this mission.”

As with pursuing her college degree, Thompson didn’t have anyone paving a path for her. Once again, that didn’t deter her. As a student putting herself through college, she set out to help other students do the same.

“I’m 20 and trying to figure this all out on my own,” Thompson said. “At first, I filled out the wrong form. Then, after a lot of very difficult paperwork, I finally got it.”

With the paperwork behind her, she began raising money for the fund. Once again, her mom came alongside to support her. The two organized a food truck rally in Greenville Street Park in downtown Newnan, with all proceeds going directly into the scholarship fund.

To date, Thompson has raised \$300 of the initial \$500 scholarship. As she looks ahead, she said she hopes to bring awareness and fundraising into every school in Coweta County with a student game called “Penny Wars.” Each grade will compete by bringing in spare change for a short period of time.

“It’s really fun, and it gets competitive,” Thompson said. “Although it’s a sad topic (losing a parent), it brings lightness to a serious topic kids can learn about.”

As she continues to raise money, Thompson said she hopes to award the first Guardian Angel scholarship this summer for the fall 2023 semester. The scholarship isn’t limited to college students but is open to those in trade schools or starting a new career.

“I think that there is a different path for everyone, and \$500 can help a lot,” she said. “The Guardian Angel scholarship helps children who have lost a parent get on a path and excel.”

For more information on the Guardian Angel Scholarship Fund, contact Thompson at guardianangelscgs@gmail.com .

Photos courtesy Rachel Thompson.

Rachel Thompson is pictured on stage at the Miss Georgia pageant with her Princess program sponsor.

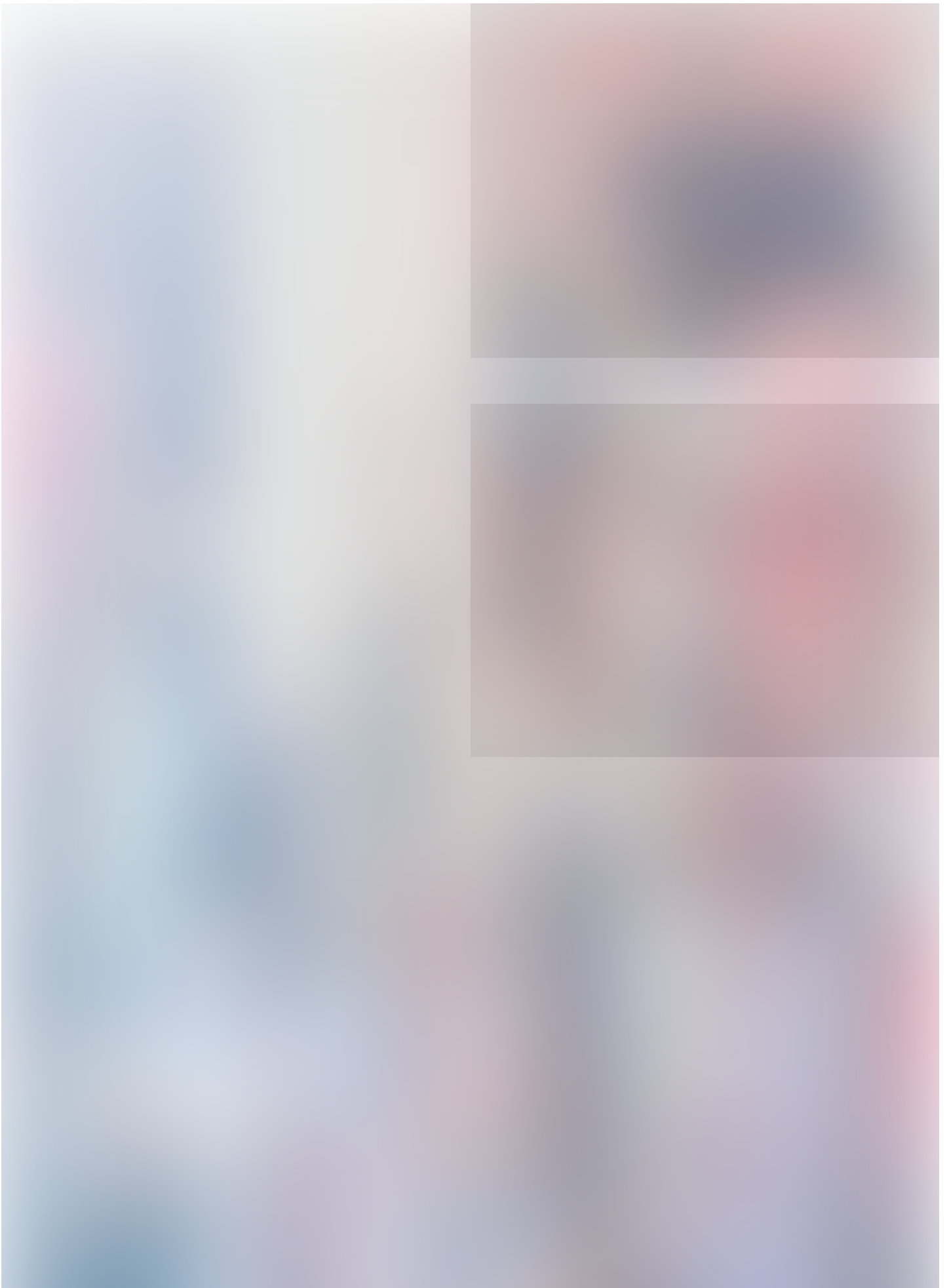
Rachel Thompson presents the Miss Coastal 2021 title.

Hosting a fundraiser at Park for Guardian Angels scholarship fund is Rachel Thompson.

Rachel Thompson is shown at Newnan Piedmont Hospital at an event for the Children’s Miracle Network.

Rachel Thompson speaks to members of Girls Inc. in Columbus.







Rachel Thompson visits Summit Family YMCA for the Princess and Superhero Bash.



Shown at the LaGrange Diverse Power Grand Prix for students is Rachel Thompson.



Rachel Thompson reads books to children at the Summit Family YMCA.

Young Rachel Thompson is pictured with her father.

