

encouraging inclusion



Top: Kelsey Harrison gets a hug from Union County High School alum Sammie Bustricky. Left: Harrison helps UCHS student Madison Suggs glue together a paper witch during a class Halloween party. Right: Kelsey Harrison (far right) is pictured with her mom Tammy Harrison (far left) and her class at UCHS. Pictured in no particular order are: students Alyssa Mann, Hunter Lee, Megan Owen, Madison Suggs, Jada Burton, Matthew Phillips and Maddie Cruz, UCHS alum Sammie Bustricky and para-professionals Cathy Griffis, Karen Williams and Yate Roberts.

Kelsey Harrison unites the community with her Celebration of Abilities campaign.

Story and photos by KAYLA LOKEINSKY

Even after graduating high school several years ago, Kelsey Harrison is constantly thinking about the most sacred right of passage for high school students: prom.

For the past eight years, Kelsey has organized a prom for the exceptional needs students at Union County High School. Now, as the reigning Miss Florida Azalea, she is using her platform to promote the inclusion of exceptional needs individuals into the community through her Celebration of Abilities campaign.

Her Inspiration

Growing up, Kelsey, 22, was always close with her younger brother, Carson. Things weren't always easy for Carson, 17, who was diagnosed with OHI, Other Health Impairments, when he was born, and last year he was diagnosed with autism.

"Watching him grow up I saw the struggle he had with his peers and interacting with them," Kelsey said.

Things that most people don't give a second thought to, like getting your learner's permit, something that Carson was able to achieve this year, mean everything to him and his family.

"I'm overly excited for him," Kelsey said while beaming with pride. "It's something most people take for granted but to him it's independence."

While watching her brother and the students in her mother's classroom throughout the years, she developed a deep passion for wanting to get exceptional needs students more involved in the school community. So, she planned the first prom for students with exceptional needs at UCHS, and over the past eight years it has blossomed into an event that gets the entire Lake Butler community involved.

"It's one of the most amazing things I've ever been a part of," Kelsey said.

Local businesses sponsor the event while others donate items from prom dresses to free hair and makeup. Many of the UCHS students go to the prom with exceptional needs students as dates or buddies. It's a dance that means so much more.

"It creates inclusion between regular-needs and exceptional-needs students," Kelsey said.

The event, which will be held again this February, is truly a celebration of abilities.

"It's really a night to highlight their abilities and not their disabilities," Kelsey said.

Kelsey's mother, Tammy, sees first-hand just how much this event impacts the exceptional needs students as their teacher at UCHS. Tammy says she is so proud of how her daughter has created an event and a platform for all students to come together.

"For so many years these students were never really included," Tammy said. "It's amazing to see how much its grown and how many people have gotten involved."

More Than A Crown

Kelsey, who was born and raised in Union County, began competing in beauty pageants when she was in high school. She loves being on stage and she's been able to put herself through school with the scholarship money she's earned, but for her pageants mean so much more. They give her a place to share her platform, Celebration of Abilities, with the community.

As the reigning Miss Florida Azalea, she has been able to share her platform with people all throughout her community and the surrounding counties.

"To me a local title is very important because I'm so passionate about my platform and this gives me something to stand on," Kelsey said.

When she went to compete at the 2017 Miss Florida pageant, Kelsey won one of the pageant's most prestigious scholarships, the Quality of Life Scholarship. The first community-service related award presented to Miss America contestants, all Miss Florida contestants are eligible for the award but only the top six are invited to speak about it in front of the judges. Applicants must excel in their commitment to enhancing the quality of life for others through volunteerism and service, and Kelsey's Celebration of Abilities platform earned her the coveted honor.

She also received the Community Service Award Scholarship and the Miss America Scholastic Achievement Scholarship, as well as placed in the Top 11 at Miss Florida. This scholarships have helped fund her education at the University of Florida. In 2018 she will graduate from UF with a degree in communications and minors in non-profit organization and family relations.

When she isn't studying or at school she is volunteering with the exceptional needs students at UCHS and Lake Butler Elementary School. She also visits with student organizations and classrooms throughout UCHS, telling them about Celebration of Abilities and how they can get involved. The highlight of her week is getting to spend time with the students who have become like family to her.

"I don't make their day, they make mine," Kelsey said. "I can never have a bad day when I come here."

One of the former UCHS students she has become very close with is Sammie Bustricky. Together they run errands, visit each others families and spend time at UCHS helping out in Tammy's classroom.

"He's my buddy," Kelsey said. "We spend a lot of time together."

Sammie is also helping Kelsey with her Hero Next Door campaign. She has asked people in the surrounding area to nominate a student with exceptional needs who deserves recognition. When a student is chosen they will get to be interviewed and have their story and picture in Currents as part of an advertisement from Royals Mobile Homes. The main purpose of the campaign is not only to recognize exceptional needs students in the community but also give them an opportunity to speak for themselves.

"I wanted their voices to be heard," Kelsey said.

Kelsey and Celebration of Abilities have also partnered with the Florida Crown Workforce, a program that helps students with disabilities get connected with jobs.

Kelsey hopes to eventually create an inclusion-type curriculum with the Florida Department of Education. Until then, she will continue to encourage people to "see the able, not the label."

"I feel like that's something we always try to say," Kelsey said. "Your disability and your label don't define you. It's a part of you and it's what helps make you who you are."



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