



WOMEN OF STYLE  
by Amber Woods

Mrs. Maryland America 2013

# Heather Ziehl

*Much more than a pretty face, this beauty queen has given her time and talent to promote her community and champion individuals with disabilities.*

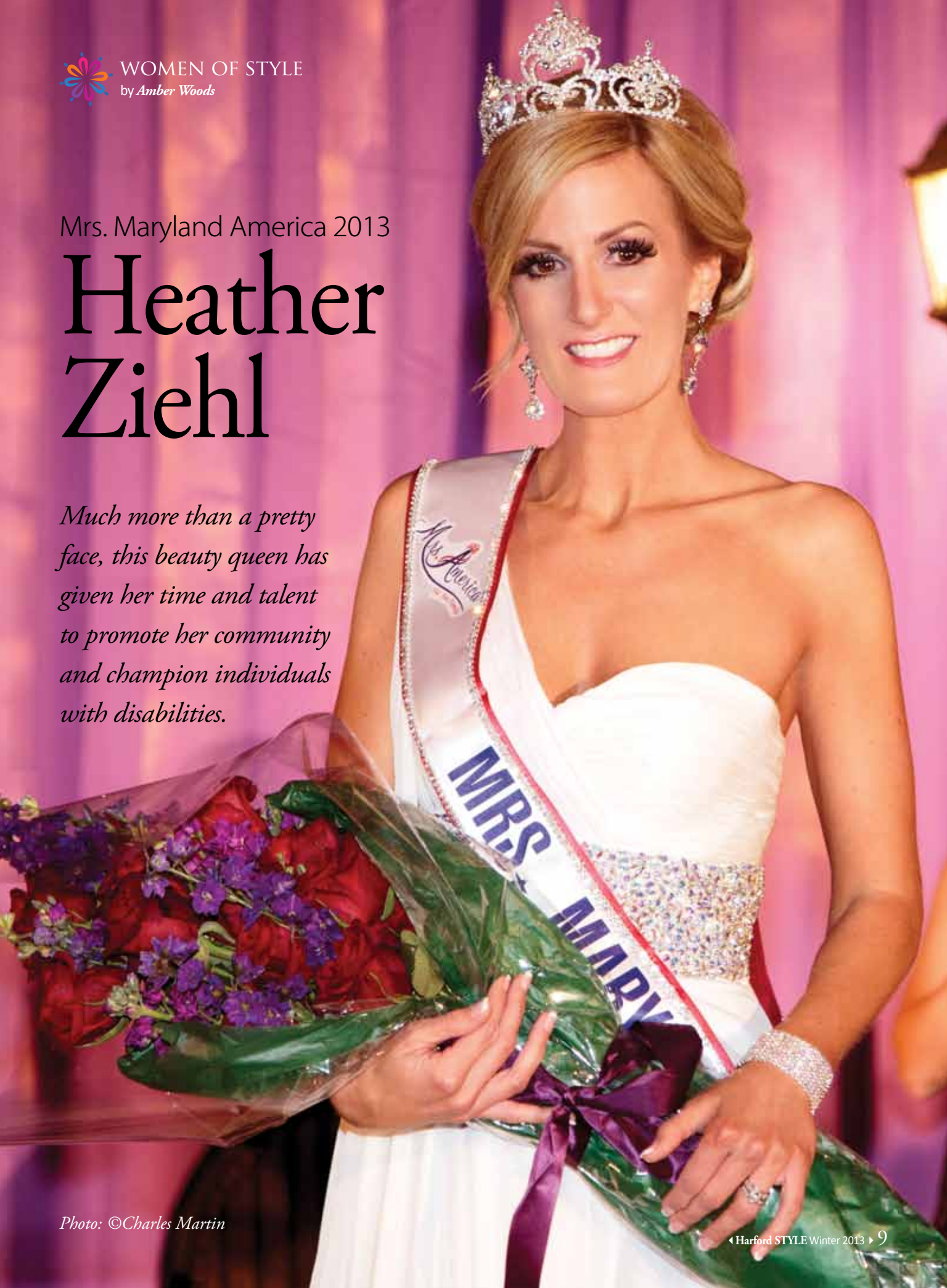


Photo: ©Charles Martin



"All of a sudden, everything was ripped away," Heather said, explaining how she and her husband went from a two-income household to living on his salary alone. "I was looking for work, but couldn't even land interviews".

While many young girls were daydreaming of a future Cinderella-style wedding or beauty pageant in which they are adorned with a towering diamond tiara, Heather Ziehl of Bel Air never had those kinds of dreams. "I definitely never thought I would be in pageants", Heather said, expressing continued disbelief over her new title of Mrs. Maryland. She was crowned on November 3, 2012 when she competed as Mrs. Northern Chesapeake Maryland America 2012 against four other contestants.

It was Heather's second try for the title, which is open to married Maryland women in their 20's to 50's. Heather, who is 35, and a lifelong resident of Harford County, lives with her husband Michael and 15-year-old stepdaughter Brianna, who has Down Syndrome. The pageant winner learned from an early age exactly what tenacity looks like. Brought up by her single mother who never had the opportunity to follow her own dreams because she was always focused on providing for her daughter, Heather is quick to say her mother has always been a role model; teaching her to be fiscally responsible and independent.

Though these days she's known as the bubbly statuesque blonde, the pageant winner says it was a slow transformation that brought her to where she is today. That physical transformation would begin with a 50-pound weight loss just two years after she graduated from High School. The turning point for the future head-turner would be one born in self-discovery. Fed up with being overweight and feeling sluggish, Heather began researching diet and exercise in an effort to improve her health. By then creating what she describes as a modified version of the popular weight-loss program Weight Watchers and combining it with regular cardio workouts, she reached her weight loss goal.

At the time, still a very young woman, she enrolled at Harford Community College studying business, Heather says she was still unsure of what she wanted to do with her life. But the physical transformation sent her confidence skyrocketing. It turns out that confidence would become the secret ingredient to Heather's many future successes. Landing jobs in promotions and marketing, with only experience and her magnetic personality backing her, Heather found herself enthusiastically working in the tradeshow industry where her beauty and confidence were key attributes to success.

When she reflects on that time, Heather recalls things going along much as she had planned. She met up with a former high school friend and kindled a romance that would lead to her intimate wedding day. Skipping the lavish and large ceremony one might imagine for a pageant-type, Heather and her husband Michael opted for a small wedding at the Bellagio Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada where the two were wed in front of the hotel's famous fountains; a tribute to their joint love of the famous film "Oceans 11", in which the fountains serve as the backdrop in several popular scenes.

Just when Heather thought she had accomplished her own version of the American Dream, she joined the ranks of many other Americans suffering from the crumbling economy, and lost her job in the tradeshow industry due to downsizing.

“All of a sudden, everything was ripped away,” Heather said, explaining how she and her husband went from a two-income household to living on his salary alone. “I was looking for work, but couldn’t even land interviews”. Heather says that time in her life gave her a deeper appreciation for her husband’s willingness to support her, and also a stronger drive to forge her own way. “I had become an instant housewife, without a choice”. It was something Heather had never considered for herself.

Shortly after, in what she describes as a “fluke”, Heather launched a networking organization in Bel Air in an effort to help herself and others find job opportunities. The group consisted mostly of women, who enjoyed each others company and formed strong friendships. One day while spending time with girl friends, Heather would jokingly refer to her networking group as the “True Housewives of Bel Air”, mocking the popular TV reality series of a similar name. She then took it a step farther, having black tank tops designed, emblazoned with the name across the front. She and other women from her social circle began wearing them around town. And then, much to Heather’s surprise, the name caught on within the community and women she didn’t know began approaching her asking if they could purchase a matching shirt, or participate in the ladies’ many outings.

Heather, always thinking of ways to promote her way to the next big thing, began seeing an opportunity for the “True Housewives of Bel Air” to be more than just a networking group. After all, if so many people were paying attention to the ladies donning black shirts, then maybe she could capitalize on all that attention and somehow focus their efforts on local charities, small businesses and nonprofit events.

By syncing up with Bel Air’s First Friday events and the Bel Air Downtown Alliance, Heather and the “True Housewives” began providing groups of volunteers to nonprofit and charity events in Bel Air. Once she brought a clearer mission to the “True Housewives”, Heather noticed the group’s name could sometimes puts people off, especially other women, giving the impression that the volunteers may be similar to the outrageous personalities portrayed in the reality TV show. In an effort to avoid misrepresentation of a group of what Heather says is extremely dedicated volunteers, few who are even housewives, she recently decided to rebrand her group by launching a contest for a name that better represents the group and its community-minded goals. Heather says she would like people in the community to help her decide on a name this time, and she will soon be announcing details about the competition on her Facebook page.



Photo: ©Amy Jones

*Heather meets with Julie Chmura, Executive Director of The ARC*

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**Much like her ability to create a volunteer organization nearly by mistake, Heather’s energy and knack for self promotion scored her the Mrs. Maryland title and then promptly landed her a long-awaited career opportunity. Now serving on the Events Committee for the Northern Chesapeake Region Chapter of The Arc, Heather found herself involved with an organization that has the goals that align with her Mrs. Maryland platform. Creating inclusion for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities like her young stepdaughter Brianna, so they have more opportunities in the workforce.**

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Though she says she is still learning all of the ways she can use her crown to benefit causes she believes in, Heather says there are a few ingredients she considers necessary in making anything a success when it comes to promotions. The backbone of her career this far, Heather says networking is key. All it takes is a quick glimpse at her Facebook page to see this is something she mastered long ago, with daily posts to her followers including inspirational quotes and event announcements.

Heather says hands-on experience in any business or venture is also a key to success. And perhaps the ingredient Heather has used the most of-something she likes to call “hustle”. She says “hustle” is much like it sounds, moving quickly but also always going above what people expect. Sometimes that means making one more phone call than expected of you, or developing one more new idea, she says. Heather says even after applying all of these skills, there must be a balance so that being enthusiastic never becomes obnoxious.

Heather has certainly mastered that balance, as evident when she exhibited grace and poise in the state pageant. And now just a few months after that win, she’s already intently set on the next goal: the Mrs. America competition set for August 2013. She says she would have been unable to compete in the Mrs. Maryland pageant without the support of many local businesses that donated their time, services and funds to sponsor her. And for the next pageant, she will need even more support and has already begun seeking more supporters.

With a full plate, Heather spends her time first and foremost, as a wife and mother. The rest of her time is spent providing marketing and events consulting services to local businesses, Mrs. Maryland appearances, volunteering in the community, and promoting The Arc and several other Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities organizations, hoping to ultimately create more opportunities for those with IDD. She says she intends to use her title as Mrs. Maryland as an opportunity to “create the ultimate level of awareness” for those with IDD, like her stepdaughter Brianna.

Maintaining her fit physique and polished image requires upkeep, much of which she credits to her personal trainer and friend Debra Curry, who taught her the discipline and skills required to achieve what Heather says is the best physical appearance she’s ever had. Pageant judges agreed with her, awarding Heather champion of the Fitness Competition at the Mrs. Maryland pageant. Not surprisingly, the ever-popular Heather also won the Pageant’s Entourage award, bringing the rowdiest and most supportive crowd from Harford County out to loudly cheer as she took the stage, strutting her way to one more major accomplishment.

If you would like to support Mrs. Maryland in her upcoming run for Mrs. America, she welcomes you to email her [heatherziehl@gmail.com](mailto:heatherziehl@gmail.com) or visit [www.heatherziehl.com](http://www.heatherziehl.com).