

MISS KE

Ohio County's fishing fiddler has country in her heart

By Kevin Kelly



KEVIN KELLY PHOTO

KENTUCKY

OUTDOORS



PEOPLE IDENTIFY Ramsey Carpenter most as Miss Kentucky or as the girl with the green fiddle.

Not many would peg this bluegrass-playing beauty queen from Hartford as someone who also enjoys fishing, field trials and target shooting.

“Put her in a pair of jeans and a flannel shirt and take her fishing, or put her on a stage in Atlantic City, she’s comfortable anywhere,” Hartford mayor Charlotte Hendricks said.

As the reigning Miss Kentucky, Carpenter’s duties take up much of her time.

She crisscrosses the state promoting the Kentucky Proud label for the Kentucky Department of Agriculture. She had visited 50 schools in the month and a half following her top 12 finish at the Miss America pageant in September.

The day before the November elections, however, Carpenter took a break from her busy schedule and spent an afternoon fishing on Taylorsville Lake.

“I know you’re thinking, ‘Why was Miss Kentucky, a woman, out fishing?’” she posted on her Facebook page that evening. “I’ll tell you; because I love it!! Being an outdoor adventure lover is great recreation for women just as much as men. Being raised in rural Ohio County in western Kentucky, I grew up with an outdoorsman lifestyle; I go fishing, I hike, and yes, I enjoy shooting.”

Facing page: 2014 Miss Kentucky Ramsey Carpenter with a crappie caught in early November at Taylorsville Lake.



PHOTO COURTESY MATT GOINS

Welcome signs bearing Hartford’s unique slogan, “Home of 2,000 Happy People & A Few Soreheads,” greet motorists as they enter the city limits.

Carpenter is one of the “few soreheads,” and proud of it.

“It’s an award given for outstanding community service,” she said. “It’s like the local version of the Kentucky Colonel.”

Hendricks bestowed the honor on Carpenter after she won the Miss Kentucky

After winning the Miss Kentucky crown in July, Ramsey Carpenter finished in the top 12 at the Miss America competition.

pageant in July in her final try. Seemingly overnight, signs went up further welcoming visitors to the Hartford hometown of Miss Kentucky 2014.

“I hurried to get those signs up because she’s from Hartford,” Hendricks said. “I was going to claim her before anybody else did.”

The city derived its name from a deer crossing on the Rough River and it was the river's impoundment upstream of Hartford that created Rough River Lake. Carpenter spent the Fourth of July boating on the lake.

The first couple of times Carpenter went fishing, she spent the time watching and learning before picking up a fishing rod and reel.

Her biggest catch ever? Well, it involved some luck, she said.

"A few years ago at Herrington Lake, I caught a hybrid striped bass," Carpenter said. "I'm going to say it was probably about 10 pounds. I was proud of that. At first, I thought I was hooked on a log. I started to put the reel down and my friend said, 'Your rod is moving.' So, I picked it up and it was a fish. That turned out pretty well."

Having never used a spinning reel before, she quickly mastered the technique during her outing on Taylorsville Lake and was hauling in keeper-sized crappie by the end of the trip. Not surprising for Carpenter, her papaw said.

"She's super intelligent, that's for sure, and has a memory like an elephant," Don Ramsey said. "You tell her something one time and she knows it."

Participating in shoot-to-retrieve field trials with her papaw and a German shorthaired pointer named Polly is another source of enjoyment.

Ramsey, a retired coal miner, lives not far from the field trial grounds.

"We have a pretty nice field and have field trials the first Saturday in every month," he said. "Last year, she would take the dog and I would just shoot for her. The way things are with her schedule, she hasn't been able to make any this year."

As a kid, Carpenter liked shooting BB guns and remembers the kick and bruise imparted on her shoulder after firing a shotgun the first time. She now enjoys target shooting.

"I like shooting pistols the most," she said.

Ramsey planned to dust off his old muzzleloader and take his granddaughter out to shoot it while she was back in Ohio County the week before Thanksgiving. She also has expressed an interest in bow hunting, he said.

"The last time I talked to her, I know she was wanting to go deer hunting with a bow," according to Ramsey. "My brother-in-



OBIE WILLIAMS PHOTO

Carpenter, who plays a signature green fiddle built by Herman Alvey, is a member of the County Line Bluegrass group.

-law has made some long bows and he's got one for her."

Carpenter developed her interests at her own pace. It helped growing up around people who spent time outdoors.

"Being around it is infectious," she said. "My papaw also is big into bird watching. I had friends who were big into fishing. I had a few others who were into shooting clay pigeons and doing things like that.

"I've had a lot of different opportunities not only to do those activities for my own

enjoyment but almost as social interaction. You want to give it a try."

A friendly disposition and outgoing personality serve Carpenter well in her public role.

She's as comfortable speaking to an assembly of school children and rubbing elbows with state officials and business leaders as she is playing the fiddle in front of a crowd, either on her own or as a founding member of County Line Bluegrass.

The band has played events across the state, including the Salato Sampler at the Salato Wildlife Education Center in Frankfort, and even performed at the famed Ryman Auditorium in Nashville.

“Being an outdoor adventure lover is great recreation for women just as much as men.”

“Being raised in rural Ohio County in western Kentucky, I grew up with an outdoorsman lifestyle; I go fishing, I hike, and yes, I enjoy shooting, too.”

“Ramsey is very entertaining on stage,” said Chad Miles, executive director of the Kentucky Fish and Wildlife Foundation. “The crowds at past Salato Samplers have enjoyed her fiddle playing and clogging.”

Carpenter’s doing all this while raising awareness about multiple sclerosis.

The incurable disease affects the central nervous system and she was diagnosed as having it in the summer of 2010, just days after her 20th birthday.

Carpenter has been heavily involved with the Kentucky-Southeast Indiana chapter of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society and recently was elected to chapter’s Board of Trustees.

Unbeknownst to her, the tingling she briefly experienced in her fingers and toes in May 2010 was the disease manifesting. The symptoms returned that August but persisted longer. A battery of tests, including a spinal tap, confirmed she had the relapsing-remitting form of multiple sclerosis (MS).

Many call MS the invisible disease. Carpenter compares it to a snowflake because it affects everyone differently. As she explains, the body attacks itself along the myelin sheath – the protective layer around nerve fibers – and creates lesions. The location of the lesions dictates the symptoms.

“For example, I had a few of them in my brain and those had an effect on my emotions,” Carpenter said. “I had a couple along my spine. Those gave me a foot drop in my left leg. I ended up having to wear a brace and do physical therapy. That’s back to normal. Also, those are the ones that caused a sensation that felt like a loss of blood circulation and a prickly, tingly feeling in my



KEVIN KELLY PHOTO

hands and feet.”

Before her diagnosis, her body wouldn’t cooperate with her desire to play the fiddle.

“I walked in for my papaw’s birthday and he wanted me to play his favorite song,” Carpenter recalled. “Beside me, he’s the biggest bluegrass fan in our family. As I watched my hand that day, I could not control which fingers picked up. I had completely lost it. Way before I was Miss Kentucky, I was that girl with the green fiddle. I just thought, ‘This is a big part of me and now it’s gone?’”

MS is a degenerative disease. Researchers are working toward a cure, but for now she keeps the symptoms controlled by self-injecting medication three times a week.

“There was a small hiccup in time as far as the MS being a setback,” she said. “But after that, it’s one of those things that whether it’s MS or any other type of chronic or incurable thing, if you’re feeling up to it why not go out and do it?”

Diagnosed in 2010, Carpenter says her ongoing battle with multiple sclerosis won’t inhibit her from enjoying the outdoors.

Carpenter played the National Anthem on her fiddle before the University of Kentucky’s football home opener against the University of Tennessee at Martin on Aug. 30.

At the Miss America pageant, she won the preliminary talent competition playing “Sally Goodin” and “Orange Blossom Special,” but didn’t get the chance to play the fiddle on the final night of the competition.

“I bet you the night of that beauty pageant there was not a TV set in Ohio County that wasn’t tuned to it,” Hendricks said. “That’s how excited everyone was. Everyone is extremely proud of her.”

A University of Kentucky graduate, Carpenter accepted a teaching job at Ohio County High School before the Miss Kentucky pageant. She aspires to a career in school administration – either as a principal or special education director for a county – but is keeping her options open.

As her reign continues, Carpenter is content representing the state as Miss Kentucky and intent on staying active.

“My biggest thing is just going on living,” she said. “A really big part of it is leading a healthy lifestyle, energizing your body with the correct things. Eating things that are good for you and making sure you stay really active to help build muscle memory. You might have a relapse and it can help you bounce back faster from that and resume regular activities.

“It’s not anything that inhibits me from going and taking part in the outdoors or anything else.” ■