

Heather FRENCH HENRY

Defying Expectations and Making Differences Every Day

Heather French Henry is a truly remarkable lady. She works tirelessly to make a difference daily in the lives of all Kentuckians, as well as doing big things for our veterans. We would be remiss not to mention that she also means a great deal to TOPS, as she was our very first cover story back in January of 2017 Heather was gracious enough to take a quick break and spend some time with our own Rocko Jerome.

PHOTO BY DANNY ALEXANDER

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IN EVERYTHING THAT I DO, MY MAIN INTENTION IS ALWAYS TO

Make Kentucky Proud

With those simple words, Heather French Henry has lived a life of purpose service, dignity and intent.

Raised in Augusta, Heather came from a working class family. The lessons of her father still guide her today. "He's a decorated veteran of Vietnam," she says, "and he's of that generation where we're only just now recognizing concepts like PTSD and its long term effects. He's always been a figure of great strength to me." The first line about Heather's life story is almost always that she was Miss America in 2000 and the first from Kentucky, but perhaps her most important work has been in devotion to improving the lives of veterans. Selflessly, she used the attention directed towards her from that pageant's accolade towards the monumentally important task of making a difference for those who served. All too often, these brave men and women are left disabled or fall through the cracks and become homeless. Heather formed the Heather French Foundation for Veterans. It's an ongoing campaign of compassion. The organization's motto is "Honoring those who died by serving those who live." It's about as personal as it gets for Heather "Their sacrifices are incalculable, and that doesn't stop after wartime ends," she says. In 2014, she was appointed as Commissioner of the Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs, where she's served as an outstanding advocate. She also worked as Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner of KDVA, serving under two governors, Steve Beshear and Matt Bevin.

"One of the things about the great honor of becoming Miss America is that it changes the course of your life and plans," Heather says. "I was on a trajectory for a career in fashion design before winning that title afforded me so many new options and avenues, so when I came back to that it was with fresh eyes." Heather had graduated from the prestigious University of Cincinnati College of Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning just before she took the crown. In the years since then she's put her passion for fashion to work creating elegant designs for every woman. It was something that she knew would be important to her from an early age. “For as far back as I can recall, I always found fashion and style captivating," she says. The name of her line is Frenchy, and you can peruse her luxurious work online.

For all of the tremendous work that Heather has done, her greatest pride comes from her daughters. She beams when she talks about the family she's formed with her husband, former Lieutenant Governor Steve Henry. "I watch the way that they engage with all kinds of people, they're so far ahead of most kids their age. There's so much importance in a handshake, eye contact, and a smile, it makes all the difference in opening doors of opportunity for everyone."

As she gears up for a run at becoming the Kentucky Secretary of State in next year's election, Heather has built a life full of defied expectations, making impacts and improvements to the world in ways few might have expected, a Miss America leading foundations to help homeless veterans, a fashion designer serving in public office. Heather's is a life well lived. "Maybe I just like the challenges," she says with a laugh. "One thing that I can tell you for sure is that as much as I like getting fixed up, I'm just as happy in a ballcap!" ■

