

Yakima Herald-Republic a daily part of your life

BIOGRAPHY- Ambrose, Connie BIO.00041

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BRAINS balancing BEAUTY

*Former Miss Washington
wins hearts, minds
as teacher, administrator,
Woman of Achievement*

Connie Ambrose leans forward in her chair and scribbles a few notes to record the conversation. She sits at the head of a long conference table filled with stacks of files at the far end and social service specialists on either side.

Ambrose, administrator of the state Department of Social and Health Services office in Toppenish, leads discussion about a new medical service for underprivileged children as if leading a horse to water — with gentle persuasion yet a firm commitment to get results.

On the wall behind Ambrose hangs a framed poster of an Indian village covered in snow. Wisps of smoke filter from the watercolor tepees and blend into the gray sky. The poster commemorates the National Congress of American Indians held in Dallas, Texas, in 1977.

The poster and the social services meetings offer a symbolic glimpse of 38-year-old Ambrose. The child of a culturally-mixed marriage whose father is a Yakima Indian and whose mother came from what she described as a "white migrant family," Ambrose has been the top official at the local state office for nearly three years.

She is also a former Miss Yakima Valley beauty queen who captured the Miss Washington State pageant in 1972, then traveled to Puerto Rico that same year to compete in the Miss America pageant.

More recently, Ambrose is a "Woman of Achievement," named Thursday night as one of six recipients of the fourth annual award sponsored by the Yakima chapter of the YWCA. The award is given to women who make significant contributions to the community. Ambrose, who was recognized in the government category, was honored along with the other recipients at a banquet.

"I'm very honored by the award," she said Thursday before the awards dinner. "It confirms to me I am making more of an impact in the area ... than I thought in the past. Sometimes you start to think you are beating your head against a wall."

BORN AND REARED IN WHITE SWAN and the eldest of six children, Ambrose graduated from high school in 1972. At the time her ambition centered on modeling — a desire instilled by her mother, Laurel Weismann Ambrose, who died of viral pneumonia in 1970.

Her mother mentioned once how, if she wanted, Connie could be a model like the ones the television.

"She had a quiet way of letting you know what your potential was," remembers Ambrose. The idea stuck, especially after her mother's death, and while still a senior in high school she entered the Valley beauty pageant with the idea of furthering a career in modeling.

With a tawny complexion, long silky-black hair and an easy smile, Ambrose won the hearts of both the judges and the event coordinator, Harold Larson.

"Her beauty stood out so much," recalls Larson, who ran the Miss Yakima Valley pageant for 18



Above, meetings are a way of life for Connie Ambrose as administrator of Toppenish's 59-employee Department of Social and Health Services. At left, winning pageants was once a way of life, too. In 1972 Ambrose won Miss Washington, and went on to win Miss Yakima Valley.

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years. He and his wife chaperoned Ambrose on her subsequent appearances.

Ambrose went on to capture both the 1972 Miss Washington crown and the resulting modeling contracts that year. It was a time of expanding horizons at a dizzying pace for the 18-year-old woman from tiny White Swan.

"When you come from a small town — being exposed to the big cities, first Seattle, then New York, then Puerto Rico — it was a cultural shock," Ambrose says. "It was strange, exciting and scary."

While in Puerto Rico, Ambrose witnessed violent demonstrations aimed at the Miss America pageant that included the bombing of the hotel where the contestants were booked.

"It scared the dickens out of everybody," Larson said.

The demonstrators also attempted to disrupt the pageant by knocking out the pageant transmitter, and at one point surrounded a bus full of young contestants. America was not a favorite cousin of some Puerto Rican citizens at the time.

Ambrose came away from the Miss America pageant with something more than a new awareness for international relations.

"I didn't place," she says of the contest. "I didn't want to place. It seemed false. To always be constantly on parade was not my idea of fun."

"Maybe it was my age. Maybe if I had some life experience it would have helped. It was a lot to assimilate — too much too fast."

SHE ALSO CAME HOME from Puerto Rico with a new commitment, a "desire to be recognized for achievements rather than outward beauty."

Ambrose returned to the Seattle area where she occasionally modeled and worked as an aide in a nursing home. She set new goals for herself.

She received an associate's degree from Shoreline Community College in 1974, then decided it was time to come home.

Ambrose was married, albeit briefly, after her return to the Yakima Valley and worked at the White Swan Molding Plant. But a desire to complete her education remained constant. With encouragement, she enrolled in an Eastern Washington University extension program in Toppenish while continuing to work for the Yakima tribe.

She received a degree in speech communication in 1980, remarried and moved to California where she enrolled at Stanford University in Palo Alto. She earned a master's degree in 1982 and was hired at Humboldt State University in Arcata, Calif. as academic adviser to education students with a special emphasis on Indian students.

But once again the Yakima Valley would beckon Ambrose home. In 1985 she accepted a teaching position in education and computer science at Heritage College in Toppenish. She brought her three children, now ages 10, 8 and 7, and moved back to her home town, once again single.

After three years at Heritage, Ambrose took on to her current position at DSHS where she oversees the work of 59 full-time state employees.

Ambrose also serves on the Private Industry Council Board, an economic development-oriented group under the Yakima Valley New Visions umbrella, and is a former member of the Yakima Coalition for the Homeless.

AN ANONYMOUS NOMINATION for the Woman of Achievement award described Ambrose as a woman of "integrity and sensitivity," who through her leadership has built a loyal core of employees. Despite the long and winding road that brought her back to the Yakima Valley, the experiences along the way have given her a special perspective on how best to serve people in need of help.

As she said: "I think I bring a collective awareness of different experiences having faced and conquered some of the challenges of being of mixed descent."

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