

A CONVERSATION

BY LAURI MCNIGHT | PHOTOS BY SANDY ARENA

Between Lauri McKnight, Children Awaiting Parents' Executive Director and Sandy Arena, Worth More Nation Founder

In March, Children Waiting Parents (CAP) Executive Director Lauri McKnight was honored to be guest speaker at Worth More Nation's (WMN) annual fundraising fashion show. As CAP and WMN have a strong, shared bond, Lauri and WMN Founder Sandy Arena had the following conversation about children—particularly the needs of girls—currently or formerly in foster care.

LM: How was Worth More Nation founded, and what drew you to this mission/passion?

SA: I founded Worth More Nation (WMN) in 2016 with the vision to empower girls and young women. The name came to me while praying and running on a treadmill at the Pittsford Y! I was a former faith-based dance studio owner and founder/director of a faith-based traveling ballet company working with thousands of girls over the years producing programs and shows with higher purpose. We transitioned the directorship of that organization to my oldest daughter Alexis, who since made it her own. While I was still involved in the organization—mentoring her as needed and serving as her professional photographer—I dearly missed working with children and young people and was ready again for something of my own.

I then registered the name and created a template for a social media and online presence, and then let the name sit as I had no idea specifically what Worth More Nation would be, or how it would serve. All I knew was that I wanted to empower young ladies and girls to gain confidence and inner strength and to know their worth.



It wasn't until the following year in 2017—through my personal involvement fostering children in our home, as well as working in the pageantry and fashion industries as a photographer and also “Momager” to my youngest daughter Annaliese—that WMN would become better defined as an organization that

would help girls know their worth through fashion, pageantry and giving initiatives.

LM: What drew you to this mission/passion?

SA: I was sexually abused as a child by my grandfather and suffered through moving to a new home or town at least every other year. I had lived in 25 homes by the time I graduated from high school, including four homes during the first year of my life. My father was an alcoholic and my parents divorced when I was a young teen. I knew from experience that early trauma had a way of whispering the lie that you don't matter and that you are less than those around you. I became passionate about helping girls and young women rise out of traumatic times to live out their God-given destinies with the knowledge that they are ENOUGH and that they are Worth More.

LM: Why is this so important for the participants? What kind of results are you seeing?

SA: I had seen with my own daughter that participating in pageants, fashion shows and fashion shoots and wearing beautiful garments—if done compassionately and correctly—had a way of boosting her confidence and bringing her joy while







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she made new friends and developed poise, presentation, public speaking and advocacy skills for a lifetime. I see the power of these moments to transform girls where they would hold their head higher, smile more brightly, or walk with more confidence. I see the power of a dress to transform and to set the stage for what could be. I see a shy demeanor turn to triumph when girls would gather the confidence to walk on a stage or speak in a microphone. I see them light up in the appreciation of applause, and in the glory of being seen and noticed.

Through WMN's initiatives and programs then, I wanted to provide girls in need of a boost and coming out of traumatic places that same opportunity regardless of their support systems or abilities to pay. I wanted to give girls that same healing balm.

LM: Who can participate, and what is the process?

SA: Specifically, WMN offers an annual Miss Worth More Nation Pageant where girls impacted by foster care or any kind of trauma are invited to participate at no charge. These include girls who are in foster care, girls who have been adopted through foster care, girls who have aged out of foster care, and girls who are siblings in families who foster. We also work with girls who join families through any kind of adoption circumstance.

At the pageant, each girl receives a gown and a dress to wear in the pageant and take home, as well as a Miss Worth More Nation banner, crown and t-shirt.

At the pageant, the girls are mentored by professional models and pageant girls as well as leaders in the foster care community. They are taught poise, public speaking and presentation skills, and the end of the program, they showcase the skills they learn on a beautiful stage in front of an audience. Because of the confidentiality and nature of foster care in some circumstances where girls are still in the system, our pageants are not open to the public and are attended by family and friends.

LM: Where do you get your dresses?

SA: We have a special occasion closet filled with hundreds of gorgeous, barely worn gowns and cocktail dresses that has been donated to us mostly through the national pageant community. As word spreads, more dresses show up at our doorstep, and our headquarters is filled to capacity with tulle, sequins and glitter! The girls and young ladies we serve are invited to take dresses for their own personal use for proms, adoption ceremonies, school concerts and events, and even just for fun. As quickly as they come in, we want them to go out again! We also use the gowns and dresses for our Miss Worth More Nation Pageant, as well as to showcase them on the runway at our Fashion Show Fundraisers featuring girls who have been in our Worth More Nation pageants, as well as professional models and pageant girls from other pageant systems. These fundraisers support the pageant so we can offer them for free.

LM: What's the biggest take-away?

SA: My biggest take-away for our participants in our Miss Worth More Nation Pageant for Girls impacted by Foster Care and Trauma, or our empowerment fashion shows and photo shoots is that they would feel appreciated, confident and supported. We want them to see what could be and realize their potential. We want them to know their worth and value and to embrace the idea of a future without limit. We want them to dream bigger and to walk into those dreams with confidence. We want them to meet new friends, find new mentors and gather in a community of support. We want them to know they are loved and cherished and that they matter, and that there is a giant team of Worth More Nation volunteers behind them who cares.

I am a woman of faith who believes that God created each person with a purpose, plan and destiny to bring them hope and a good future. When trauma enters into your life as a child—through no fault your own—the unconscious messages often are that it is your fault and that you are unworthy. It is so important to girls and young ladies experiencing hard circumstances to break out of those negative mindsets and to find inner value and purpose to break free to a new future. I know this from personal hardship and experience.

LM: What kind of funding support do you receive?

SA: We have been supported by the upstate New York and national pageant and fashion community who have embraced our idea of building confidence

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and self-worth because they know from their own personal experiences that pageantry with purpose and fashion on the runway can be powerful. I always joke that if you want something done, ask a pageant girl and pageant mom. I have found these girls and women to be goal oriented, compassionate, and service oriented. They are the ones collecting and shipping us the dresses and gowns that our participants wear on stage and bring home. We also have received a tremendous amount of support from the foster care community, professional photographers, and from our local and school communities. All of our goals have been accomplished through in-kind donations of gowns and dresses, and fundraising efforts.

LM: What do you want the world to know about Worth More Nation?

SA: I want the world to know that we are here to help all girls and young ladies in need of a boost to know and understand their worth, and that we do it through the power of pageantry with a purpose, fashion, advocacy, and giving. There are so many broken children and young people in this world, and it is within our power to come alongside to guide and offer our love, support and healing. Glitter is our gig and it is fun, happy and impactful!

LM: What are your next goals?

SA: To take Worth More Nation to a higher level, our next goal is to become a 501(c)(3) organization to open up new levels of funding to expand our programs. My goal is to have a Miss

Worth More Nation Pageant in every state. I want to gather girls from across the country in the Finger Lakes area for an annual, national pageant to showcase on a national stage to help advocacy and to be connected to a community. We need funding support for legal fees for the 501(c)(3), and for event production fees. A crown, banner, and t-shirt package costs approximately \$60 per girl, never mind the venue and production costs to produce a top notch pageant event. We only want the best for the girls we serve!

Another goal is to beautify our Worth More Nation dress closet. To keep our expenses down, the dress closet is currently located in a spacious and separate apartment area in our home. Last year, we held a fashion show fundraiser to raise money to put down new flooring in the closet. The floors are currently crumbling and we have makeshift rugs to try to cover them. We ended up donating that money to support a local foster care family who had tragically lost one of their children that they had adopted through foster care. They were collecting money to give him the funeral service he deserved, and we felt that was more important to support than our flooring needs. Girls come to the closet for fittings for our pageants and fashion shows, and I would love for them to have a top notch boutique experience when trying on the dresses, because after all, that is part of the fun and joy in the confidence building journey!

LM: Who has been involved behind the scenes, and how have they helped?

SA: My entire family—including husband

Sam, son Caleb, son-in-law John, and daughters Alexis and Annaliese have been deeply supportive of WMN. They do everything from moving dresses and show equipment from one place to another; hauling props and gowns to our empowerment photo shoots; working backstage as dressing room attendants or backstage managers; to performing dance productions on our stages. My oldest daughter Alexis has been so gracious in sharing her dance company at our shows.

My youngest daughter Annaliese, however, has been the most involved in the administrative work behind the scenes, helping to keep the dress closet organized along with other local pageant volunteers, helping with all of the dress fittings, and, as a professional model and pageant titleholder for the past nine years, teaching and demonstrating staging and public speaking skills to our participants. She also serves as our emcee, as she is very comfortable in the spotlight and has excellent public speaking skills, learned through participating in pageants! Annaliese has held many pageant titles over the years and has walked in many fashion shows. She is the current Miss Guam High School America and will compete for the title of Miss High School America 2021 in June in Little Rock, Arkansas. Visit her LinkTree to connect with her online: <https://linktr.ee/AnnalieseArena>

For more information about Worth More Nation, visit www.worthmornation.org. Facebook: [worthmornation](https://www.facebook.com/worthmornation); Instagram: [@worth_more_nation](https://www.instagram.com/worth_more_nation); Youtube: [Worth More Nation](https://www.youtube.com/WorthMoreNation).



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