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Miss Moraga Valley takes on the Universe

By Sophie Braccini



Mary Beth Ward on the Saint Mary's campus Photo Sophie Braccini

A cute, slender blond with baby blue eyes and a lot of self-confidence, Mary Beth Ward, a Moraga-raised Saint Mary's College (SMC) student, decided she wants to represent Moraga in the Miss Universe beauty pageant, a joint venture of Donald J. Trump and NBC Universal. She says her motivation is helping younger girls discover their inner beauty.

"I was watching e-news on Channel 24 and saw an ad for Miss Universe," recalls the SMC freshman, "they said that anyone could apply. I had never been in a pageant, but found the idea interesting. I looked it up and liked the emphasis on community service: they wanted young women who give back and they claim they are evaluating the girls on their achievements. So I decided to apply."

Ward had to pick a name for herself to enter the first stage, which is the Miss California competition. She asked her childhood neighbor, Moraga Mayor Karen Mendonca, what she thought about using the name Miss Moraga Valley. "The young women can enter this contest with any name they want," said Mendonca, "Mary Beth wanted a name that would represent where she comes from, but not compromise any town or jurisdiction because we never had a contest. 'Miss Moraga Valley' is a good idea."

The first title to win on the way to Miss Universe is Miss California. 150 young women, who were selected by the Miss Universe organization from among those who applied, will compete for that title on January 8th. Ward said that she went through a series of phone and personal interviews to be selected. She believes that her volunteerism in Moraga, as a Girl Scout, a member of the Moraga Youth Involvement

Committee, and in her church, played a key role.

"I want to take this opportunity to make a difference in my community," says Ward. "When I was in fourth grade I was chubby and too tall, other kids would tease me. Girls between 4th and 7th grade have body image issues and try to fit it. It's a very hard time, with a lot of clique-ish behaviors and pressures." Her objective is to create or support events and workshops that will empower young women.

The New Rheem Theatre will provide her with her first chance. "We are planning a movie day/workshop combination," she says, "we'll have a movie at 11:00 a.m. on a Saturday, such as *Miss Congeniality*, followed by a discussion with a motivational speaker and activities for the girls." Ward herself gets trained by the Miss Universe organization, with podcasts and videos on female empowerment, fitness, and motivation.

At the end of November, Ward will go to Florida for an orientation session. Then she will have to get ready for the California competition in Palm Springs. "I know that some of the girls have pageant coaches, but I do not," says Ward, "the girls in my Hall are prepping me, and they interview me or make me walk in heels—it's like getting ready for Senior Ball!" Ward thinks that she has a good chance to win. "I am really hopeful," she says.

Ward has a Facebook page <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Mary-Beth-Ward-for-Miss-California-USA/273561789351501>, where interested Moraga residents can 'like' her project. "Whatever happens, I will continue the community service for girls," she concludes.

Moraga Art Gallery Finds a New Home

By Sophie Braccini

Wenda Pyman could add the title Fearless Negotiator to her business card, alongside Landscape, Scenic and Travel Photography Artist and President of the Moraga Art Gallery (MAG). The Moraga photographer has arranged a good, although temporary, solution for the artists' collective, MAG, that was recently told it needed to find a new home.

Readers may remember that MAG lost the free use of some space leased by Comcast in the Rheem Center, where it has been displaying the work of local artists for 10 years. (See www.lamorindaweekly.com/archive/issue0512/Moraga-Art-Gallery-Loses-its-Space.html).

MAG artists looked everywhere for solutions compatible with their limited resources. Pyman decided to contact the headquarters of the property owner, Kimco Realty. "I had been in touch with New York executives when we started displaying members' artwork in empty store fronts in 2009," says Pyman, "so I thought I should call them again and see what they could do for us this time."

The solution is a new space, at 518 Center Street next to T.J. Maxx, for a moderate rent, but with a caveat. "We signed a 12-month conditional lease," explains Pyman, "and if this space gets a permanent lessee, we will be asked to vacate immediately." So Pyman and her fellow artists are still looking for a permanent solution.

At this time and until the end of the year, MAG is still in the Comcast space at 570 Center Street, showing *Masks and Meditations: Art Quilts* by Susan Helle, as well as holiday work by all of its members. The Gallery will close after Christmas and will reopen in the new space after the few weeks that will be necessary to ready the location.

Seen See's?

Also in the Rheem Center, November 18 until December 24, the Kiwanis Club of Moraga Valley will again sell See's Candies during the holiday season. The temporary store was very successful last year. Proceeds from this fundraising activity go to the Club's community service projects.




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