

FIRST BIG BREAK

Jeanne Robertson

Playing emcee at the Miss North Carolina pageant in 1964 proved to be an unexpected beginning to a fun-filled career in public speaking.

Jeanne Swanner Robertson is a woman who's quick to laugh at her own foibles, and one of her major themes is that life is better when we don't take ourselves too seriously. In summing up her career, she likes a line that Morley Safer used when he introduced her on "60 Minutes": "Jeanne Robertson began her career when she was Miss North Carolina in 1963, and no one has milked it for more."

It may be worth noting that Robertson originated the quip, and Safer borrowed it.

The first hint that winning a beauty pageant might open the door to a lifetime on stage came in July 1964, on the night she passed on her crown at Raleigh's War Memorial Auditorium (now Progress Energy for the Performing Arts).

"The Raleigh Jaycees were hosting the pageant, and they had come to me the previous December with a request. The pageant lasted four nights and was on live television," Robertson recalls. "In those days before computers, the judges took some time in tabulating their votes ... leaving these holes in the program that had to be filled. In the past, they had always paid singing and dancing acts to fill the time. But that December they came to me and said, 'Could you just be backstage and come out and be funny?' Well that sounded fine to me, but then when I calculated all the fillers I'd need, plus 30 minutes at the opening night banquet, and my farewell speech — it was going to take a lot of material. There was no way I could repeat myself because it was the same audience for all four nights."

Robertson started writing material and trying it out.

"I had to be funny, four or five times a night. And it worked," she says. "The newspaper made a comparison to Andy Griffith, and that made me feel so good. To this day I still have people come up to me and say, 'I remember what you said on TV.'"

"I found that I liked being up there, making people laugh. And after the pageant was over, a man came up to me and asked if maybe I could put all those shorter stories together and make a speech. I told him I could, and after giving up my crown on Sunday, on Tuesday I drove to Wrightsville Beach and spoke to the North Carolina ABC board at the Blockade Runner Hotel, which was brand new. And they paid me something like 50 or 100 dollars. And that's when this whole career really started.

"The older I get the more I realize what a chance those Jaycees took on me and in changing from the way they were doing it. The danger was that they didn't have any backup. They would say, 'It's Jeanne's turn,' and out I'd go. The Jaycees had a lot of confidence in me, and I've been very grateful for that opportunity ever since.

"I did three speeches that first week, and I've never looked back."

Bill Morris lives in Chapel Hill.

For a link to Jeanne Robertson's website, go to www.ourstate.com, and click on "This Month's Issue."

By Bill Morris

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