



Survivor

ASHLEY BENDIKSEN

When Miss New Bedford Ashley Bendiksen came to talk to the kids at New Bedford's Whaling City High School, she was pretty sure they were looking at her with a heavy dose of skepticism. These were at-risk kids who were often transferred to the alternative school for behavioral and disciplinary issues.

Here comes this pretty girl with a crown on her head. What could she ever have to say to them?

When she told them she was homeless at nineteen, living out of cars and in an abusive relationship, she had their attention.

That's the thing about Bendiksen. She's entirely unexpected. A petite woman, not a hair out of place, dressed perfectly for her work representing the Bristol County District Attorney's office to the public and the press. She was the victim of domestic abuse?

that she was going through a similar issue.

"At every single appearance, I had at least one disclosure. I'd see girls crying in the audience. Someone would come up to me afterwards to say, 'I'm going through it.'"

It shouldn't be surprising that her speaking engagements resonate with her audiences. According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men will experience some form of physical violence by an intimate partner in their lifetimes. And young women between the ages of 18 and 24 are the most commonly abused.

The New Bedford resident continues the public speaking while also juggling myriad leadership roles in local charities. She founded ONE Theater Group with a friend shortly after her mother passed away from early onset Alzheimer's disease as a way to raise money for

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At times, Bendiksen had trouble conceiving it herself. Although friends and family had expressed their misgivings about her boyfriend, she couldn't see it clearly. She labeled their relationship issues as everything but domestic abuse. She spent two years in this unhealthy relationship, eventually dropping out of UMass Lowell in 2006.

A physical attack later that year galvanized her. She obtained a restraining order against her former boyfriend and set out to put her life back on course. She worked three jobs to fund her return to college and entered the Miss New Bedford pageant hoping for scholarship money.

When she won the pageant in 2008, her platform was to promote the issue of domestic abuse.

She wouldn't hide that she was a victim. She'd talk about it. She'd teach others the signs to look for.

That year, she had 120 public speaking appearances including the one at the Whaling City School where she captured the students' attention and earned their trust.

As has happened at every single one of her speaking engagements, a young woman approached her to tell her

research for the disease. The first production was so successful that they've continued, each production benefitting a different local charity.

She is the chairperson of the annual Walk to End Alzheimer's; the chair of the Miss New Bedford scholarship program; and on the board of the YWCA.

For the past eight years, she's served in the Big Sister program where she's watched her little sister Aisha grow up from elementary to middle school.

Bendiksen wears so many hats that it's a surprise to learn that she's just 29.

A week after her mother passed away in 2014, Bendiksen served as the MC at the Walk to End Alzheimer's. She says, "when she got sick with Alzheimer's, I thought, 'I'll be her voice even when she doesn't have one.' That doesn't end just because she passed away. She's my driving force. My heart grew six sizes the day she died..."

"Love more. Do more. Just make her proud."