

Active advocacy

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FISHERSVILLE - Throughout her life, Buddy Hayes was active, but not athletic.

"I was always the last one picked for gym class," laughed the retired therapeutic recreation specialist from Chesapeake. Today, she's definitely someone you'd want on your team.

Since becoming wheelchair-bound four years ago due to multiple sclerosis, Hayes, 48, has won two full marathons and two half-marathons, not to mention several gold medals - in swimming, air rifle and slalom, all victories claimed by the former Army enlistee at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games.

On Saturday, the driven athlete, national motivational speaker and active volunteer added one more title to her list of accomplishments: Ms. Wheelchair Virginia 2007-08.

During an evening ceremony at the Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center, the headquarters of the Ms. Wheelchair Va. program, Hayes was selected from a field of 10 for her dedicated advocacy and passionate platform.

"She was very eloquent and very articulate," said judge Birdie Minor, Ms. Wheelchair Va. 1979. "I also like her sense of humor. I think she comes across as a very positive role model."

As the reigning queen, Hayes will spend the next year making public appearances to increase awareness of the issues facing the disabled community and, most importantly, to advocate for their rights.

Her platform was promoting sports and recreation for everybody - wait, make that every BODY.

"Body in capital letters," she instructed, "because it means everyone, whether they're standing up or sitting down. A lot of people don't realize that when you're in a wheelchair, you can still do sports."

It's a lesson Hayes has clearly put into practice in her own life - prodded, she said, by a dare from her physical therapist. "She did the ultimate double-dog dare," joked Hayes. It was a challenge she couldn't refuse.

While, for many, the struggle of adjusting to a new way of life would already be overwhelming, without adding the additional physical challenge, Hayes brushes off any such suggestion.

"It was different, but now it's just the new normal," she said with a shrug. "I rarely look back; I always look forward."

She paused, then leaned forward with a glint in her eye. "I may be sitting down," she said, "but I'm rarely parked."

Saturday was the Ms. Wheelchair Va. event's first return to Woodrow Wilson. Revived in 2001 after a 15-year absence, the contest has been held in Richmond the last five years.



Miss Buddy C. Hayes, of Chesapeake, was crowned Miss Wheelchair Virginia 2007-2008 Saturday night at the Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center in Fishersville. (NORMAN CARTER/Staff)