

If you were to print out Dr. Debbye Turner Bell's accomplishments...

well-

There would be many, many pages to print.

Dr. Bell's experience covers a wide variety of accomplishments and successful careers and if you could translate each of her successes into a story the chapters would be many and remarkably interesting to say the least, but you'll have to wait for an ending because she's still adding chapters. Debbye was born in Hawaii and grew up in Arkansas, graduated from the University of Missouri with a Doctorate in Veterinary Medicine, was Miss America, has hosted many t.v. shows (48 Hours, "The Gentle Doctor" "Show me St. Louis." Et.al.) She has appeared on several shows such as "Oprah" "The Late Show with David Letterman" and the "Today" show. Debbye has served on local, state, and national boards such as Children's Miracle Network, National Advisory for Child Health and Human Development Council to name just a very few, and has also earned several Awards and honors throughout her career as well as establishing Scholarships at Arkansas State University.

\*whew!\*

We should take a moment to catch our breath.

okay, let's get back at it.

Debbye is goal oriented and driven to lead and guide people with a passion that is at the core of who she is, but just trying to comprehend her ability and attempting to keep up with her pace will surely make anyone realize that she is in the marathon of life to win gracefully and is a supercharged competitor. I was able to catch up (momentarily) with Debbye and ask a few questions and learn more about her before she's off and running again.

First, I want to thank Debbye, for sharing her time to sit down and do this interview with me. (And yes, Debbye was sitting down-That's how I was able to catch up with her.)

**TS:** Most of the questions are straightforward, but there might a couple of them that are not, but you said I could try and catch you off guard, so I'll try.

(Debbye is grinning-her look says: 'give it your best shot!')

**TS:** Okay, I'll start with Hawaii and Arkansas. Two very different places, So how did it happen that your family moved from Hawaii to Arkansas?

**DTB:** Well, there's not a straight line from Hawaii to Arkansas. My father was in the military. He was an infantryman in the Army and was stationed at Schofield barracks, which is in Hawaii and that's where I was born, but I lived in six different places the first five years of my life partly because of his military assignments and also in part because of that was the time of the Vietnam War. My father did three tours in Vietnam, and each time he went to Vietnam we would move back to my mother's hometown so my grandmother could help care for us. So, between Hawaii and Arkansas I also lived in Fort Leonardwood, Missouri, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, Fort Hood, Kentucky and then Jonesboro, Arkansas.

**TS:** Your mother and father both had interesting careers, could you tell us what they did and if they

influenced you in any way to become a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine?

**DTB:** Yeah. Yeah. I come from a very educated family, especially on my father's side. His dad was a principal, his mom taught French and home economics in high school and were instrumental in the Civil Rights struggle of the time, so my father was recruited to come to Jonesboro, which was the place of his birth and upbringing, to integrate the staff at Arkansas State University. He and two other black men were the first three African American to attend Arkansas State University. So he helped integrate the student population and then was recruited once more to come back and teach in their ROTC Department as the first black on staff at ASU. That's what brought us back to Jonesboro and while he was there, he finished his Masters and went on to a storied career in the military retiring as a Lieutenant Colonel. My mother on the other hand was the typical, if you will 1950's woman in that she went to business college while she was single, but at that time women basically had two options for education. They could go to business school to become a secretary, or a teachers college to become a teacher. So while she was in business school she got engaged and married my dad. So she did what women did back in those days: she quit her job., became a full-time mom at home. Well when their marriage fell apart and they separated she was left as the head of the household and wasn't educated enough to provide for the lifestyle that she wanted to have for her two girls, my older sister and I. So while raising two girls by herself, she went back to school, finished her college degree, got a Masters and began a career. So education always very highly advocated for and pushed in my family. It was not a matter of whether I would go to college. It was a matter of what I would do when I go there. And in terms of being a Veterinarian, no they didn't influence me specifically. However, my mother had a great love of animals, and so we had a house full of pets and animals, and it wasn't because of my sister and I. It was because of my mom. She would pull over on the side of the road and pick up any injured you know, half-road kill anything and bring it home and nurse it back to health. And so, you know, I grew up around someone who had great compassion for God's living things, and that did rub off on me, but I also have a great love of science in my mind. The marriage of the love of animals and the love of science is what made me become a veterinarian.

**TS:** Do you have any special memories from going up? With your mother and father having unique careers I'm sure there are some, but is there one or two that you can share that you consider special?

**DTB:** As a child growing up with parents that had big careers there are some, so yeah. Well, my father moved out of home when I was relatively young and I specifically remember the conversation that he had with my sister and I that he was moving out. I write about it in my book that's coming out later this year. So I was pretty young when he was in the home. My memories of childhood of course revolve around my mom and the kind of person that she was-phenomenal. I don't know how she did all the things that she did. I don't know how she went back and finished her education, working full-time while taking care of us. You know. Our homework was done. Our lunches were made. I took ballet and baton and cheerleading, and I don't know how she managed all of that in addition to that she was a volunteer in the community. I mean we took hot meals to the elderly that didn't have family that visited them. She had her Master's in Psychology and Sociology, so at one point in her career she worked in a mental hospital and would bring some of her clients home for the holidays if they didn't have family. She'd bring them home so that they could be in a family setting for a holiday. And I'll never forget you know, she'd set us down and have conversations with my sister and me about what we could and couldn't do because she's bringing mentally unstable people home, but her heart of compassion was just that big. I remember there was an elderly woman across the street from us and my mother would send us over. She would go with us to vacuum, wash dishes, and clean her house. She was old and couldn't do those things anymore, and I remember my mother clipped her toenails because she couldn't that anymore, and as a child I hated that, but now I appreciate the great heart of service that my mother had in

addition to all of that, she taught a bible study from our home for just about entire childhood that eventually became a church that still exists to this day. Even Though my mom's been dead for 25 years, she left quite a legacy of service and devotion to faith in God. Everything I know about living holy and living a righteous life by the power of the Holy Spirit I learned at my mother's apron string and I'm forever grateful for that amazing person. Amazing. I don't know how she did it. I don't really. I really don't know how she did it. I mean, I'm married, have one child and I can barely keep all of the balls juggling in the air. How she did all of that on limited budgets. We weren't even middle class, we were lower middle class, and raising two girls you know, and she was sunny and happy and just a force of nature. She was incredible.

**TS:** When you graduated from college, it wasn't to long after that you were crowned Miss America, how did that change your life at the time, or is it still changing it? When people learn that you were Miss America does it eclipse the other areas of your life?

**DTB:** Yeah. Very intuitive question. So becoming Miss America irrevocably changed my life in revolutionary ways and I use those big long multisyllabic words because that is just how great an impact that one night had on my life. I went from being an anonymous little country girl in veterinary school in Missouri to instantly overnight being a household name, and understand that when I won Miss America, it was back in its heyday, there were I believe 30 to 40 million people that watched the broadcast live, there were 20,000 in the convention hall there live for for the actual pageant, and in those days, the new Miss America name and face was put on the front page of every major newspaper at that time, so all of a sudden I became known and I wasn't equipped for that at all. And at first it was fun, I mean, you know, it's kind of cool for people to chase me around, you know, "can I have your autograph?" or "Can I take your picture?" and this was back in the days when people actually carried cameras and cell phones didn't exist. But, after a while it became quite a burden because it was a loss of anonymity, a loss of innocence. I quickly learned that there were people who had ulterior motives and had other things in mind in wanting to get to know you, or just getting close to just wanting to know Debbye. SO it was difficult in that way and it was hard job. I liken it to running for President. I traveled 20,000 miles a month. I was in and out of every city in 18-36 hours. I worked seven days a week for 48 weeks of the year that I was Miss America. It was the hardest physically, emotionally and spiritually job I've ever done in my life, and then of course the repercussions of that year still reverberate 30 years later in many ways, in many great ways. Looking back 30 years. It's great. It has been a little while since I was Miss America, and now I'm like overweight and in my 50's, but it becomes the elephant in the room. I'm a doctor. I'm a doctor of veterinary medicine. A business owner. I've traveled the world, an ordained minister, and you know, blah-blah-blah, all those things, but as soon as someone finds out I was Miss America, that's all they see and that's all they want to talk about, so it sucks the air out of the room.

**TS:** Debbye, you said I could try to trick you with some questions. I'm trying.

**DTB:** You're doing good, but nothing yet!

**TS:** Okay, we'll move forward and get away from the eclipsing crown. You've worked as a Journalist for Arise Network, who are they and what places have you been to that have given you memorable experiences?

**DTB:** Well, I'll talk about where I started before I arrived at Arise Network. I started off in Broadcast News on the local level doing pet segments, and that was great. It was fun. It was something easy to do. I had this brand new education plus the skills I learned from being Miss America. And eventually got a job hosting an entertainment show in St. Louis, Missouri. I did that for almost five years and then went to CBS News. For 11 years as a correspondent and it was an amazing experience, traveled literally around

the world, and certainly all over the country, you know, chasing stories at first then I was a feature reporter. So I was just doing those, It was stuff like: 'My dad is getting old, so when do I take the car keys from him?' those kinds of stories, but I pitched pet stories to my boss. He didn't even know I was a veterinarian, and so I said: "You know people love their pets. Two-thirds of American households have at least one and they spend more on their pets than they do on toys and candy for their kids." I got to try segment as a result of that. I became the "Network's Resident Veterinarian" and so I did all the animal stories, pet stories or wildlife stories that were done across all the platforms of CBS, with the exception of 60 Minutes. I did those stories., and so it was a great run. I loved it, but as is the nature of television in general, certainly Broadcast news at the network level, a new management team came in and revamped the whole show and got rid of all the contributors of which I was one, and so I left CBS and went to Arise News which was this start-up Global Cable News Network. The Owner imagined being able to compete with the likes of CNN on a global level, and I wanted to anchor, so he offered it to me, so I took it and it was a neat run. My very first assignment was covering the World Economic Forum in Davos Switzerland, and then I spent six weeks in London anchoring because he opened the London Bureau. I covered Nelson Mandela's funeral in South Africa. So, Arise was a really unique and awesome experience in many ways, but as is typical of any start-up you know, it was volatile and it got to a point where it was just a little too volatile for me, so I resigned from that position and not long after that, My husbands' job offered him a position that required us to move to Grand Rapids, so almost four years ago we moved here.

**TS:** What about your first, best and worst jobs. What were they?

**DTB:** Delivering local newspapers. I was 12 years old. Back then you could do that at 12. After school. I'd ride my bike to the newspaper company and get my little allotment of newspapers and go through the neighborhood. The goal was to get the paper up on the front porch, so that was kind of fun and challenging, but it kind of sucked because the papers had to be delivered by, I think by 5:00 a.m. on the weekend too. So my mother had to wake up on the weekend and drive me because it was still dark, so that sucked a little bit and then at one point what ended it for me was going through my regular neighborhood route but two teenaged boys that had nothing better to do began to harass me and threatened to kill me. Thankfully I was able to flee and I was unharmed, but when I told my mom about that, that was the end of my newspaper route. So that was the first job. My worst job..lets' see. You know, I wouldn't say any were worse, because there are a couple of things that are a motto in my life: Find the fun wherever you are, and try to make the best of any situation, and the other is bloom where you are planted. Oh! I worked at Mc Donalds! McDonalds was my first real job at 16 when I was legal to work which I loved. I wear that as a badge! I worked in a department store, and a grocery store before going to veterinary school. Yeah. Let me see..probably the worst was probably when I was in Veterinary Medicine where I was scooping up cattle poop. That might have been the worst thing.

**TS:** I'll admit this interview is racing along, but I don't want it to end. I'll ask a few more questions since you're still sitting still.

**TS:** I mentioned in the introduction that if we could print out your resume/accomplishments we'd quite a few pages, but there is one theme that runs through your experience: Children. You are determined in your advocacy for children's healthcare, education and keeping them motivated and inspired. What's your inspiration for doing all that you've done, and continue to do for children?

**DTB:** Yeah. So when I won the Miss America title, that was the first year that the organization allowed what they called an "official platform" so going into the competition I knew that if I won I would have the opportunity to champion a cause and I chose youth motivation, really for a very basic reason and that was: I grew up in a single-parent lower-middle-class segregated Southern Environment where all of the

odds were against me, and the statistics were not in my favor for a kids that looked like me and where I came from couldn't make it, but by the grace of God I did, and I was able to win the Miss America Pageant and so at that time, and I still am very passionate about young people knowing that they do not have to be limited by the environment in which they find themselves. They are not defined by their experiences, that's not their identities and were created by an awesome and excellent God who placed excellence in them to live an excellent life, but so many young people live below their potential because nobody told them they could do it. They're victims of bullying, and are told they have no potential. If I were able to, I could poll every single person I talked to and they would say that someone told them they couldn't make it in life. You're not smart enough., you come from the wrong side of town, or whatever. We all hear these negative voices and then our popular culture in general, you know, images are being shown before us everyday: the perfect body, the perfect smile, the perfect hair, the perfect house-all of this stuff and the message is if you don't look like this, have this, act like this, then you're not a real success. Well, personally, I think that's a lie from the pit of Hell, and so I wanted young people to know that if they set goals and were dedicated to work for them and work long enough that they could achieve their goals. So that's where it started and I still believe that to this day. I don't get to work with young people as much as I did in those days. I think I aged out of it, because I'm like for some people, old enough to be their grandparent, but I still believe that our young people will live up to, or down to the expectations that we have for them.

**TS:** What are the challenges you see for children regarding education and healthcare? Is there gaps in society that allow them to fall through?

**DTB:** I would say that racial, ethnic disparities in this country present a huge barrier for our young people. This country was founded on prejudice, and it still pervades every sector of our society, but what's a great thing is that more and more people are aware of it and acknowledge it now, we still have such a long way to go to create equity for everyone, and not just racial equity. There's gender equity and those with different abilities and the list goes on and on, so, you know, that's my concern for young people. I would also say that Social media and the internet play a role. We know they've changed our lives in many, many ways, but also for young people they're faced with issues they never would be exposed to so young in life if it weren't for social media. Whether it's cyber bullying, or cyber stalking or child pornography. All of these things have become pervasive in this age of the internet and I worry about young people because we now see statistics of young people suffering from depression at ever younger ages, and not just depression but suicidal attempts as well as use of substances because of the issues that are created by this depression that they have. Those are real things. I'm raising an 11 year old, so I'm watching in real-time what exposure to all of this can do to a young person.

**TS:** I'll go back to your "resume" once more, or I should say story. The other theme that is flowing through your river success is a word called "Motivation." You're definitely motivated and goal driven person, and a lot of people just don't have either one, so How do you influence people to become motivated and set goals? (Maybe I got Debbye on this question-Let's see)

**DTB:** Well, I got to be honest, you know you're in my sweet spots with these questions. Okay, first of all identity is absolutely essential for a person to understand who they really are and why they were created, so if you can get a person to understand who they, or to discover who they are, the possibilities are limitless. Number two is purpose. We all were put on this earth for a reason and we were given the skillset, propensities, temperament and personality that would feed and allow that purpose, so when you give someone a true sense of their identity and they use that to discover their purpose you almost have to hold them back. You won't need to motivate them, they'll motivate themselves and, you know, again, going back to the importance of good influences on young people, if we can teach them at a

young age that 'you are the way you are because that's how God created you' and you don't need to be ashamed of it. Don't let anyone online shame you for it. You're not supposed to be like anyone else. I used to say when I spoke at schools, God didn't make people to live in herds like cows were made to live in. We're uniquely different. Each and every one of us, and I think when we know our truly divinely given identity so many of those other things fall into place, even if you watch or learn about success stories, whether it's Michael Jordan who was only a mediocre basketball player in high school and in college, but you what? he knew he was willing to work and now, he's one of the greatest to ever play the sport, - although I know there's debate about that, but you know go back to actors like James Earl Jones who was born a stutterer and now has one of the most recognizable voices in our society, or the list goes on and on in all of those cases and when you look through the examples that are given to us in the Bible, people have something working against them. We all have, if you will, I'm hesitant to use the word handicap, but we all have something that holds us back. The difference between a person who achieves significance and success in life in spite of it and those who don't is that the person who achieves anyway knows their identity. They know who they are despite their circumstances and those that don't achieve success they tell themselves they can't do it and really don't know who they are, so they don't think it's worth trying a little harder, pushing a little further, so it all starts with identity in my humble opinion.

**TS:** Dang It. I guess I can't ask any hard, surprise questions. Hmm. Well, Debbye is running through these questions like a verbal athlete, (but there is a surprise hurdle coming up) \*ahem\* What about Ministry. That is the current chapter in your story. How did you become involved with it, and what are your future goals in regard to it?

**DTB:** So I can't talk about Ministry in the same way that I can talk about a career vocation, because Ministry I believe is divinely given and I didn't go looking for it. I work in Ministry now because I believe in it. I believe it's something that God has called me to. It was not something I ever aspired to, in fact, for many years I ran from it. I grew up in the church. As I said, my mom was a powerful woman of God. We had Bible study in our home, but I saw the realities of flawed human beings that run churches and I just didn't want to be a part of that. I love God and wanted to worship him and I know He wanted me to be a light that sat up on top of a hill, but I didn't want to be in church leadership. So I avoided it for a long time and finally just got to the point where I felt like God was speaking to my heart: either you're going to obey me, or not. I know the phrasing kind of sounds like mob boss, right? But there was an implicit threat in there, but I knew more than anything that I love God. I believe in his power. I saw it working in my life over and over again, so why would I be afraid of what he has for me? Because I do believe he's a good God and he's a good dad. He's a good father and no good father purposely does something to harm his children, so I made the decision. God, I'm going to trust you and I'm going to follow you where you are lead me, and so that's a whole other long story, but you know, me here on the staff at KCC is testament, an example. That's a better word of me saying many little yeses. There wasn't a big voice though that said she will be leadership development pastor at KCC, nothing like that, but it was me being willing to say yes to the little things that led me here. I am in from a faith standpoint. I believe that is the key, to just keep saying 'yes' to God, and as we say yes, he will lead us to where he wants us to be.

**TS:** Well, I tried a couple of hard/trick questions, and you effortlessly sailed through them, but I'm going to try a couple more and then I'll step aside and try to catch up with you when you "slow down"

**TS:** Debbye? Is a hotdog a sandwich? And what about toilet paper, over or under?

**DTB:** Okay. Yes. The age old question, so I'm going to approach this both as a scientist as well as a philosopher, so let's talk about the letter of the law, the spirit of the law. So if you're looking at it from

the spirit of the law, a sandwich technically contains meat that is placed between two pieces of bread. So, in spirit a hot dog qualifies because there's meat surrounded by bread. However, I would say no to that. It's a whole different experience in that with a regular sandwich there's bread on top, there's bread underneath, but there's not bread on the sides with a hot dog-the bread is on three sides, so it provides a different culinary experience in your mouth as opposed to the standard sandwich, so I'm going to fall on the side of that hot dog is not sandwich per se, but it's a close second. As for toilet paper...I'm reformed because I grew up with 'under'. My mother put it on under and so that's how I always knew it to be and did it that way, and I remember arguing with people that that was the way it was supposed to be done. Truth be told, when I became Miss America, which meant I lived in hotels basically for a year, they were all "over." I had never been exposed to over before, but decided that I liked over better. There's more control in the over, so now I'm a reformed over girl.

**TS:** Do you have any useless talents?

**DTB:** Yes, I do. How much you gonna give me to tell you some? I can do a very convincing baby goat and I can do a really convincing horse whinny.

**TS:** Wow. She's staying in it! Those were some tricky questions and you handled them with ease. A true professional. Your Siamese cat: Name, age and weight?

**DTB:** Well see, that's complicated because we used to breed Siamese cats. Growing up I had several Siamese cats, but the very first Siamese, her name was Happy, and Happy probably lived to be about 15. I was too young to remember exactly, but we had a lot of cats, a lot strays. We do not have a Siamese cat now, but we have a gray tabby. Yeah. She's not quite a year old. She's a covid kitty.

**TS:** Okay, almost done. I'm curious about one thing though. Your name. How did the unique spelling come about?

**DTB:** It's from my mother. She was very creative. My mother used the "ye" because there are other family members that used the "ye". My dad's sister was Freddy, I have an aunt Bettye. It was basically my mother's way of being creative.

**TS:** Thank you once again for the interview, and for those who would like to learn more about Debbye, go to: [www.debbyeturnerbelle.com](http://www.debbyeturnerbelle.com)

**TS:** *One more question:* Would you rather own a dragon or be a dragon?

\*My fingers are crossed. Did I finally ask a hard/trick question?-

Ohh. She paused! She's thinking..I got her!

**DTB:** Now I will say you have asked a question that I've never been asked before. You met your goal! Huh. (pause) One thing, I have a scientific mind, I'm going through the pro's and cons. I think probably again if I stick with my philosophy about identity, I'd rather be a dragon that way I can get whatever I want.

**TS:** \*Sigh\* Debbye you are gracious, fun and intelligent. I can see why you were, and easily still can be Miss America. You got my vote.

**DTB:** This was fun, Thank you.

\*This interview was done in person and converted from audio to text in March 2021.

