Science Societies

Research, pageants, and Ag-vocacy: A conversation with Hallie Wright

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Growing Agricultural

Hallie Wright performing her talent during the 2021 Miss Indiana competition. Photo courtesy of Hallie Wright.

Hallie Wright is a Ph.D. student at the University of Georgia in the Devos Lab, studying plant breeding, genetics, and genomics. Wright participated in the 2021 Congressional Visits Day hosted by the Societies' Science Policy Office and advocates for agriculture as a science communicator on social media platforms like TikTok and YouTube. She recently won the "Joy of Life" scholarship from the Miss America program in the Miss Indiana competition.

Here, Wright talked about her research, her journey through the Miss Indiana pageant on a platform of agricultural literacy, and the importance of having candid conversations about science.

The following conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

CSA News: I'm curious: where did you grow up, and how did agricultural literacy turn into such a passion?

Wright: My parents had a goat and pig farm in Indiana, and I showed those animals in 4-H. I did FFA [Future Farmers of America] in high school, but something really changed around my junior year. That's when I first heard about the global population crisis and the need to provide more resources to sustain the population increase we're expecting—the one we're experiencing right now. I fell in love with the idea of enhancing crop production through genetics and having a direct impact on our growing population. Now I'm getting my Ph.D. in plant genetics at the University of

Georgia.

CSA News: What are you researching?

Wright: I'm studying an orphan crop called finger millet. It's this highly nutritious staple food that's grown in eastern Africa and India, and researchers haven't put a lot of time into studying it. It's really limited by this horrible disease caused by the *Magnaporthe oryzae* fungus—the same fungus that causes blast in wheat and rice and 50 other crop species. I'm studying the genetics of finger millet and how we can breed blast resistance into finger millet, so producers can avoid yield losses of up to 90% in some areas.



Hallie Wright working with an FFA student. Photo courtesy of Hallie Wright.



Hallie Wright (left) shared her platform of agricultural literacy on RFD-TV, a nation-wide television station. She poses her with news anchor Janet Adkinson. Photo courtesy of Hallie Wright.

CSA News: Wow. I heard you recently had a chance to talk about your research at Congressional Visits Day—what was that like?

Wright: There was a lot of prep going into it—we had Zoom trainings every day, and I was a little bit intimidated at first. But by the end of the first call, I was like, oh my gosh, I'm actually advocating for increased agricultural research funding to Congress. It really inspired me, being able to take my science background and talking to members of Congress about what's important to them, to their districts.

CSA News: How did you advocate for agriculture in your meetings with members of Congress?

Wright: I grew up with agricultural education all around me, so I knew at a very young age how important agriculture is. But not everyone has that experience. So part of the USDA programs we're advocating for have that agriculture education element—I loved talking about my experience, how that shaped my education growing up, and the research impact. Since then, the Biden Administration increased its proposed budget for agricultural research by 16%, and it's so cool to know the Societies' work is making such a huge difference.

CSA News: This is a bit of a tangent, but I heard you've been involved with the Miss America Pageant…

Wright: Oh my gosh, that's such a funny story. When I was a first-year student at Purdue, we had a Miss Purdue pageant, and I thought it sounded interesting. I wanted to work on my interview and speaking skills, and potentially get a scholarship, but back then the organization was really different than it is now. The first time I did it, we had a swimsuit competition, and it's just crazy. You had to have a talent, too. I thought to win you had to be a vocalist, or play an instrument, or be a dancer. So I tried singing, and that is just [shudders] *not* my thing. But

I saw a girl at the Miss America pageant who did a science demonstration for her talent,

and I thought: wow. I'd been doing science—formally, in a lab—for four or five years by then. And then I realized that doing science is a talent.

CSA News: So that was your first time—did you do it again?

Wright: Well, they revamped the competition to Miss America 2.0 in 2018, and they cut out the swimsuit competition and changed the focus from looks to your platform, your social media engagement, and your speaking ability. I thought, I'm going to give it one last shot. So I had to come up with a "Social Impact Pitch," where you talk about your platform in 60 seconds or less. My platform was agricultural literacy. I did a science demonstration all about studying DNA, and I talked about my social media platforms and made my impact pitch, and I think my authentic self definitely showed. I won Miss Collegiate Indy, and we just had the Miss Indiana competition!

CSA News: How did it go?

Wright: It was amazing—I made the top 10 out of 40 contestants, and that was a big honor. I actually won the "Joy of Life" social impact scholarship for my platform of agricultural literacy, too. That, to me, was just an awesome testament that what I'm doing with ag education and literacy, it actually makes a difference.

CSA News: Why do you see science communication or ag literacy work as an important way to use your skills, especially as a trained laboratory scientist?

Wright:

Although I love laboratory science, I think I can do more on behalf of the scientists in the lab by not being in the lab. I'm a huge champion for agriculture, and if I can help people feel empowered and not scared of the decisions they make as a consumer, that's really motivating for me. Science hasn't, historically, had enough people out there championing it, communicating with the public, and I want to be that person.

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