

Victoria Upton: 20 Years of Women's LifeStyle

BY BRI KILROY, SARAH ANDERSON AND ELYSE WILD
PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHELLE KIMBLE



Victoria Upton: She is insatiably positive and uproariously inspiring. Her passion is contagious, and her brilliance is unmatched. She is fiercely dedicated to our community and a champion of diversity. Around here, we call her The Queen, a moniker she is more than deserving of. Twenty years ago this month, she created the very publication you hold in your hands as a positive force to uplift women and enhance our community and our experiences within in it.

She has tirelessly supported local institutions through her volunteer efforts at the Community Media Center, Local First, Art Prize, Spectrum Health Community Engagement, GROW, Gilda's Club, American Heart Association, Grand JazzFest, to name just a few. She has received numerous honors, including from the Van Andel Institute, the American Heart Association and the Grand Rapids Legacy Luncheon.

In the early days of desktop publishing, Upton was taking business classes at Grand Rapids Opportunities for Women (GROW) when she was inspired to pursue the idea of a magazine that would elevate women and act as a champion of local businesses. For Upton, magazines had the potential to usher positivity, benevolence and joy into the communities in which they existed.

"I loved magazines," Upton expressed. "For me, as an artist, looking at a blank page is like looking at a blank canvas and seeing all of the potential that is there to make something wonderful."

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Armed with a clipboard and permission from the store owners, Upton stationed herself in the magazine aisle at D&W, asking every person who bought a magazine what they were interested in, and if there was a publication that featured local women and businesses, would they read it?

"I wanted the magazine to be engaging," she said. "Something you would be proud to have on your living room table. I wanted it to be colorful and vibrant with an uplifting and positive message. I wanted to lift women's voices."

On April 1, 1998, Upton's tenacity was realized when the first edition of Women's LifeStyle Magazine (then called Women's Edition) hit stands. For 20 years, it has evolved with the advent of social media, revolutions in publishing technology and our ever-growing city; but the mission has remained the same.

"Our mission is still to do good and put a spotlight on the best of our community," Upton expressed. "We provide a welcoming invitation to participate in our community, and we have done that from day one."



Q & A

To celebrate the woman who turned her vision into a community staple, we turned the tables to ask her questions about her life as publisher of Women's LifeStyle Magazine.

Q: What did it feel like for you to have the first edition in your hand after all of that work?

A: I remember feeling fear. I think that's one of the things people don't acknowledge when you start a business. They think, "Oh how exciting! You get to follow your hobby, you're following your passion!" But you're scared. It's very scary. It's not that exciting. It's not like there are fireworks going off and confetti going up in the air. You're scared.

Q: What were the biggest challenges at the beginning, and what kept you motivated?

A: Taking challenges and making them into opportunities and being motivated by them can be a challenge in and of itself, but it's essential. You have to face challenges. You will have challenges coming at you left and right.

You have to stay motivated and encouraged. It helps to have people who are encouraging and positive in your corner. You move forward knowing that what you're doing is good. As long as you're always being supportive and helpful, you're probably on the right track.

Q: Why did you choose to start a magazine, as opposed to another form of media?

A: With a magazine, you can pace yourself. You can take your own time, nobody's forcing you to have to listen to pop-ups or anything like that. Your eyes peruse at a comfortable, natural rate. You can read it over and over. Take it to the beach if you want and it's not going to glare in your face; it's not going to run out of power. It's not going to "ding" at you. It's not going to send you all of these constant reminders. Nothing is going to interrupt your reading experience. I think that's why we're finding such a high appreciation rate among people who are younger because they are over the pop-ups and the interruptions.

Sometimes because of the silence of it, it is more peaceful, relaxing and welcoming.

Q: What inspires you now?

A: Women using the magazine to celebrate their accomplishments in Grand Rapids. When people are happy with the magazine, and when they have a cake made out of the cover and have a celebration (like Veverly Austin recently did). We celebrate the accomplishments of women in our community in a very positive light. I think that is one of the reasons people really love the magazine, because that light comes through and we're not afraid. If we do something, we do it fearlessly, and I think that's because we believe in the power of good.

If I'm asking someone to spend their time with this magazine, I want to make sure that it has value and it's useful and purposeful for the reader or the person whose branding depends on the magazine to be there for them. One of the other things I appreciate greatly in this community is the fact that so many businesses — over 600 — reserve a spot to have the magazine available. To me, it's huge that so many businesses and other people are supportive. So many people are invested in the magazine in some way.

Q: What is the most surprising advance you have seen in the technology you use to create WLM?

A: Social media was one of those things that was a surprise. It didn't come out of nowhere, because there was so much trial and error and experimentation leading up to it. We are always keeping an eye out for what's happening with social media. Is something different that's not going to be called social media going to come along? We don't know.

Who knew that we were going to have these phones that we really just use to read the news and take pictures with? You can read the entire magazine on your phone.

You can connect with us on social media, you can connect with any website we mention in the magazine, all on your phone. And it's something that you just slip in your pocket.

I think there are going to be more medical uses for our phones in the future. As far as the magazine goes, that would impact what's accessible to us. So will Women's Lifestyle Magazine have medical components in it at some point in time from working with the local medical industry? Maybe.

Q: Is there a particular edition in your memory that you would choose to put into a time capsule for future generations to discover?

A: There is one that's in the National Archives, an edition in which we featured Susan Ford. So we do have an edition of Women's LifeStyle that is in a sort of time capsule. I can't pick just one, because each edition stands on its own.

Q: What is the greatest lesson you've learned in 20 years of publishing?

A: Always have something good to say.

Q: What's the best advice you've ever given?

A: Practice self-discipline. It's critical. If you give yourself the gift of something, make it the gift of self-discipline.

Q: What is something people may not know about you?

A: I have a really warped sense of humor, but a lot of people know that. I am an open book. I love Comedy Central. South Park and Chapelle's Show are my favorite shows. I collect crosses and crucifixes. I am an artist, and I love to paint.



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Community Voices: Celebrating 20 Years

“Victoria Upton is a pillar of our community. She has created spaces in this community that allow women to flourish and share their goals and accomplishments.”



— Kelly Koning, Owner of The Mathew Agency

“Women's LifeStyle Magazine is our area story teller.”

— Cindy Bouma American Heart Association Communications Director



“Women's LifeStyle inspires me to meet the people around me in the community, in my neighborhood, and at events.”

— E.B. Sonheim Feyen Zylstra Marketing Manager

“I simply love this magazine, from the inspirational stories to the wonderful ads. It is truly the best monthly magazine out there, and that is why we are in it each and every month.”

— Sharon Jensen Owner of Bella Furs

“Women's LifeStyle is always full of stories of real women who do amazing things in our community. The publication truly is by, for and about women.” — Angela Klinske Mercy Health Director of Communications & PR

“This talented staff shares stories that inspire, captures real people doing real things that are driven by passion!”



— Shelly Irwin, WGVU Morning Show Host/ Producer

“I love that Women's LifeStyle covers every aspect of life as a woman in West Michigan, not just fashion or food or relationships. The content is rich and well rounded.”

— Heather Zinn Owner of The Cheese Lady

“Women's LifeStyle has been a constant place where I can go to learn about the work of the amazing women in my community. I enjoy getting to know their stories and finding nuggets of wisdom I can apply to my own life.”

— Anissa Eddie, Malamiah Juice Bar Co-Founder

