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EPISODE NAME: Vermont's Maple King and Queen

Today on Across the Fence we're gearing up for the annual Maple Festival with a visit from Vermont's royal couple the king and queen of Vermont maple. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us; I am Judy Simpson. Each year the maple king and queen help promote and publicize our state's multimillion dollar maple sugar industry. At the annual maple festival in Saint Albans later this month a new couple will be crowned. This afternoon we visit with the current maple queen. Do to a scheduling issue the maple king could not be with us but he is Dan O'Shaughnessy from Waitsfield. It's a pleasure to welcome maple queen Ayla Atherton from Richford. Thanks for being with us today. Probably presiding over one of the more unusual maple seasons we’ve ever seen.

Ayla.: I think everyone was gearing up to have a good season but it wasn't as good as we thought it was going to be.

Judy.: I guess temperatures in the eighties are not great for sugaring. Tell me a little bit about your maple background. Did you grow up in a sugaring family?

Ayla.: I did, my father and grandfather are both into sugaring. My grandfather had a sugaring business and I grew up around more of the high tech stuff. This year and last year I worked in an older operation.

Judy.: They're still using buckets and taps as opposed tubing.

Ayla.: Yes.

Judy.: Tell me a little bit about your experience? How did you learn about sugaring in the first place was it something you always remember as a child?

Ayla.: Yes I grew up into it. I always remember either when I was two or three working in the woods and learning about it.

Judy.: Tell me a little bit about your earliest maple memory?
Ayla.: Probably just as a little girl being brought down to the sugar house and boiling with everyone.

Judy.: So the real family affair. Let's talk about being maple queen how are you selected what's the process like?

Ayla.: I started off by sending an application in and I went for an interview and then I went to a banquet and that's where they crown you.

Judy.: No kidding. So how old are you?

Ayla.: I'm 16.

Judy.: So you're a junior in high school?

Ayla.: Yes.

Judy.: That's pretty exciting. Tell me a little bit about what you learned and what the most difficult part of the whole process maybe was.

Ayla.: I learned a lot of things like the different ways to do sugaring. I was always brought up with high tech stuff I like learning that it's not always as advanced and can be fun too. Probably the hardest part is getting everything together and having everything in a certain order so you can get it all done right.

Judy.: You had an interview process but did you have to write anything?

Ayla.: I did I had to write a short essay about my involvement in maple and my favorite parts of it.

Judy.: What are your favorite parts of maple sugaring?

Ayla.: I liked just working and gathering it, it’s probably my favorite part and then boiling it.

Judy.: Why did you want to become maple queen?

Ayla.: I just remember as a little girl going to all the fairs and I remember saying I want to be a maple queen someday.

Judy.: So what are some of the changes that you’ve seen in sugaring. You talked about seeing some of the operations that they still use taps vs. some more advanced operations.

Ayla.: I think before was all buckets and now they have reverse osmosis and all that so it's a lot faster process now.

Judy.: Do have an appreciation for the way things used to be as far as wood fired boilers?

Ayla.: I think it's a lot more fun that way.
Judy.: Really?

Ayla.: Yeah.

Judy.: As maple queen you have some specific duties to carry out over the year what are some other responsibilities that you had?

Ayla.: You had to go to the parades and fairs work work in the maple booth making creamees milkshakes cotton candy.

Judy.: We see a parade here's the Saint Albans?

Ayla.: That is Saint Albans yes.

Judy.: There's another float it looks like.

Ayla.: Yes.

Judy.: Excellent. You mentioned going to the different fairs which fairs did you go to?

Ayla.: There were Franklin County Field days Lamoille county field days Champlain valley fair.

Judy.: That's pretty busy. So you had to meet a lot of people was that a little scary?

Ayla.: It was the first but then you just fell into it and got used to it.

Judy.: What do people ask you?

Ayla.: They just ask me questions how I became the queen and if I like it.

Judy.: What did you learn from some of those experiences?

Ayla.: I think its fun different people asking you different questions and the little kids I like being around them and they get all excited.

Judy.: That's great. What do they want to know about?

Ayla.: I think they are just interested and might want to be it someday a maple king or queen.

Judy.: I know one of the things that you did was to go to the Big E in Springfield Massachusetts tell me about that.

Ayla.: It was a big experience for me; Vermont Day, a lot of people don't even know how works. They're asking a lot of questions. It was nice to be able to talk to them and explain how it works.

Judy.: What was the funniest question you ever got?

Ayla.: Most of them didn't even know how to tap the tree it was kind of funny.
Judy.: So did you tell them about that and show them.

Ayla.: Yes.

Judy.: No kidding. Other any ideas or thought see you have about the industry and its future? You mentioned its fun to do with the old fashioned way but people are really high tech these days.

Ayla.: I'm not really sure I think its fun to be able to do it the old way but people want to do it the more high tech way because it's faster and you can make more syrup faster.

Judy.: Are you surprised at how popular syrup has become?

Ayla.: Yes it's big now.

Judy.: It is its really big. What you think you've contributed to the maple industry by representing the state of Vermont?

Ayla.: I think that they like being able to see two people represent and show what is really like.

Judy.: How about getting your generation more involved in maple is that something that you think needs to happen?

Ayla.: Yes I think it's important to not just have older people and they have more kids involved in it so that when we grow up we can be able to still have it going.

Judy.: Do think you will be involved in maple when you become an adult?

Ayla.: Yes.

Judy.: Tell me a little bit about your other experiences because you've quite a list of accomplishments. Tell me about your riding?

Ayla.: I've been riding since I was four years old. I started showing when I was six and am always around horses and have three of my own.

Judy.: And?

Ayla.: I hold six state titles.

Judy.: I was going to say in western riding. That's a huge accomplishment.

Judy.: And you also mentioned that you've been in 4-H. Tell me a little bit about what that experience has been like for you.

Ayla.: It's a lot of fun because you can meet new friends and you can teach the younger kids stuff they don't know. People that don't really have horses you can bring them and teach them and it's a lot of fun.
Judy.: Do you think that your work in 4-H helped prepare you to be maple queen?

Ayla.: I think so.

Judy.: How do you think so?

Ayla.: I think that working with little kids because I know more gave me leadership and taught me and prepared me for things like this.

Judy.: What was your favorite part of being maple queen this past year?

Ayla.: I liked meeting the new people and just being around people at the fairs and the Big E was a big experience.

Judy.: Have you ever been to the Big E before?

Ayla.: I did once for a dance competition in 4-H.

Judy.: Oh no kidding. Tell me a little bit about what you're interested in in high school. What are your favorite subjects and what you think you're going to be doing after graduation?

Ayla.: I like science it's my favorite and painting and I've been looking into pharmacy school and ultrasound tech.

Judy.: Oh no kidding. Is this something you want to continue to stay in Vermont do you think?

Ayla.: Yes I think so.

Judy.: Let's talk about the upcoming maple festival it's the 46th annual maple festival held in Saint Albans. The dates for this year's festival are April 27, 28th and 29th. There's a web site: vtmaplefestival.org you can get all the information about the festival and so Ayla what would be your favorite memory of the festival?

Ayla.: Probably walking around trying the different maple foods and watching the parade. I'm not a big rides person.

Judy.: I hear you. What about some of the festival's traditions? Have you always gone to the festival?

Ayla.: Most years I do yes.

Judy.: There's a cooking demonstration do you have a favorite maple recipe?

Ayla.: I like maple pecan pie.

Judy.: That sounds pretty good. Did you participate in the cooking demonstrations?

Ayla.: I didn't.
Judy.: What advice do you have for someone who's thinking about applying to be maple queen?

Ayla.: I think it's a really good experience to learn a lot and it's really fun.

Judy.: Tell me again about some of the things you do as queen I know you said you went to some of the festivals but what else?

Ayla.: We pretty much went around talking to people learning new things and just being there to represent Vermont and the maple industry.

Judy.: Tell me about what your family's reaction was when you said you wanted to apply for maple queen.

Ayla.: They were excited but I think they were kind of shocked. At the same time.

Judy.: Really why do you think so?

Ayla.: I'm not really sure I think they knew I wanted to do it but they didn't think I'd really actually take the step and apply for it.

Judy.: You have to do a lot a public speaking I would imagine that is tough.

Ayla.: Yes it is.

Judy.: And being on Across the Fence is a little nerve wracking.

Ayla.: Yup.

Judy.: What you think is the most important thing for people to remember about the maple industry itself and about the people who do the sugaring?

Ayla.: I think it's really important and I think we should keep it going especially the younger generation because in a couple years it's going to be our turn to step up and keep it going.

Judy.: Do you think there is an enthusiasm for people your age to do that?

Ayla.: I think it's a lot of older people that keep it going but I think that the younger kids should be more involved. The older people should keep us involved.

Judy.: I think its part of a family tradition. Your whole family gets together that time of the year because it takes a lot of hands.

Ayla.: Yes it does.

Judy.: Tell me a little bit about some of the jobs you have to do in the sugar house.
Ayla.: You have to keep everything really clean and check for vacuum leaks in line and it's a lot of work. Maintenance in the woods you have to make sure all the trees are cleared up so nothing has fallen down.

Judy.: So probably a little easier this year since there wasn't all that snow.

Ayla.: Yes.

Judy.: And if there's a lot of snow do you still have to get out into the woods?

Ayla.: Yes.

Judy.: No kidding. All right, well there is a change we want to mention to this year's maple festival. The maple king and queen are going to continue but with a new name and with additional scholarship funding. From this point forward the maple festival committee will choose a male and female representative to be Vermont’s maple ambassadors. Each maple ambassador will be awarded a $2000 scholarship. For more information about the maple ambassador program we encourage you in your family to check the Vermont maple festival website. It has all the information on eligibility to become one of Vermont’s new maple ambassadors. Of course the web site also has all the information for the 46th annual festival which is coming up on April 27, 28th and 29th. Are you going to be at the festival as well?

Ayla.: Yes I will.

Judy.: And what will your roll be?

Ayla.: I have to talk about what I've learned this year and what I've done. Then I will crown the new ambassadors.

Judy.: Any words of advice?

Ayla.: It's kind of scary at first and you'll be nervous but after it's over with you'll be really proud of yourself.

Judy.: What do you think are some of the things you'll miss about not being a maple queen?

Ayla.: I just like being around other people and little kids and learning different things. Not just learning it's not about making the most of the tradition and the work it's a lot of fun.

Judy.: What do you think that you're going to be taking from this experience as you move forward?

Ayla.: Probably knowing that it was a great accomplishment and I appreciate all the help the people have done to get me as far as I've gone being the Vermont maple queen.

Judy.: So there are a lot of people involved in helping out. That's awesome. So this year's reign of maple queen is ending but it's springtime so that must mean they're gearing up again for horse shows?
Ayla.: Yes.

Judy.: What are some of the things you have to do to prepare for that?

Ayla.: I have to start working with them and getting them ready for the show season and cleaned up and riding a lot every day.

Judy.: What is your favorite event?

Ayla.: I show in Fairfax almost every Sunday it's a lot of fun.

Judy.: Are there different races that you do?

Ayla.: Yes I go to fairs and I'm going to try to apply to go to Eastern States to represent Vermont for showing horses this year.

Judy.: You've been there already so you should know what you are in store for.

Ayla.: Yes.

Judy.: That's wonderful. I want to wish you the best of luck and thank you very much for representing the state of Vermont as maple queen Ayla I think you have done a great job.

Ayla.: Thanks.

Judy.: That’s our program for today. I’m Judy Simpson we’ll see you again next time on Across the Fence.

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