Parlisha Watts-Andrews returned to her home town of Stockton in 2009 and was stunned by what she saw.

"Businesses were out of business. Kids were joining gangs. I couldn't believe what I saw," she said.

She decided to do something about it. She entered beauty pageants.

Yes, the 54-year-old graduate of Franklin High School, San Joaquin Delta College and in May, University of the Pacific, returned to the world of pageants and last month was named Mrs. United America in Austin, Texas. She reports beating out contestants half her age to win the fourth pageant crown of her life. The first came in 1979 when she became the first black contestant to win the title of Miss San Joaquin.

The presence of a pageant winner isn't going to open businesses back up in Stockton, but the tiara and title, Watts-Andrews said, will give her a foot in the door of schools and community programs where she can reach young people. Her goal is to take kids off the streets and put them on the stage.

"Since I was 16 I wanted to open a school of arts, to reach kids," Watts-Andrews said.

She did just that while living in Houston, where she'd gone to live with her first husband. Parlisha's School for the Arts opened in 1997 and she taught dance and etiquette and offered tutorial help for math and English.

When her father took ill in 2009, she closed the business and moved back to Stockton. She taught dance, then stopped long enough to earn her degree at Pacific.

Watts-Andrews is teaching dance at a local church, but she dreams of re-opening a school similar to the one she ran in Houston.

"My goal is to do what Tyler Perry does: write plays and get kids off the street," she said.

Helping others is an inherited characteristic.

Her dad, who worked as the personnel director for the City of Stockton, and her mom, a housewife who raised seven children, started the Patricia Lloyd Scholarship, named for her mother, a singer, to help young people finish college.

Patricia Lloyd, has lent her musical talent to fundraisers on behalf the program that counts 60 students who have college degrees, in part, because of the scholarships.

"The Patricia Lloyd Scholarship is my charity of choice," Watts-Andrews said. "They've helped so many students and it goes along with what I do, with my goal to get kids off the street, to offer them an alternative to gangs."
Community service is the key to the Mrs. United America crown.

"There's an evening gown and interview," she said. "They've replaced swimwear with fashion wear and you have to do a lot of community service. My platform is taking kids from the street to the stage."

Watts-Andrews, who five years ago married Don Andrews, a friend of her parents, and has become a grandmother to the four grandchildren he is raising, competed in the Mrs. United America pageant a year ago and was the first runner up. This time, she was crowned.

Her husband, parents and son, Justin Brown, were there to see her.

"I love what it stands for," she said of the United America pageant, which has several categories, including Miss Teen, Miss United America and Ms. United America.

Watts-Andrews keeps in shape by teaching her dance classes, but she said this pageant is more about the beauty inside the contestants.

"I meet so many beautiful women, both older and younger. Some have kids. Some have grandkids," she said. "That's really nice. It's so much fun to me. In 1979 I was the first black to win Miss San Joaquin and I experienced a lot of racism over the years. It made me strong. When I was Ms. Black Texas I did an appearance at a rodeo in Houston. This really tall white guy elbowed me in the head. I had the crown on and he hit me really hard. I almost passed out, but I kept the crown on."

Now, she wears another one with the same amount of pride.

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