

# From Cover Girl Cheerleader to Mom to Professional Photographer

Thanks to a magnet's help, Sandee Bartkowski is becoming what she might have been

By Mary Welch

Sandee Bartkowski loves being a wife and a mom to her two sons.

"I never had big ambitions or career dreams," she says. "I had a really great family, but they didn't push me to go to college. Really, I wasn't much different from most of the other girls my age. I assumed I would marry and have babies."

Bartkowski's story isn't that different from many women. Okay, fine, there's a little more glamour to it – maybe – because she married Steve Bartkowski, the famed Atlanta Falcons quarterback. But it's basically the story of a woman who spent her life making her family happy and is now finding her talent – and maybe herself.

Yes, the woman whose biggest claim to fame was that she was Mrs. Steve Bartkowski now is selling her photographs for thousands of dollars and has her own gallery.

"It's not like I'm stepping out of Steve's shadow and saying, 'It's my time to shine now,' because that's not it," she says. "But my kids are grown [they are now 24 and 27]. It doesn't matter who your husband is. I so loved being a mom, and I was there for them always. But they've grown up, and I'm finding myself."

In fact, Bartkowski says her new philosophy came from a magnet a friend gave her. "It said something like, 'It's not too late to become what you might have been.' It's a very dangerous magnet!"

Bartkowski grew up on the south side of Atlanta, blonde and pretty. While she was in high school, Rich's department store had a program in which a girl from each of several area high schools could participate in modeling shows. She represented Sylvan High School. "I started doing some modeling with Rich's, and then that led to some modeling for companies at shows at the Merchandise Mart. I started making money at a very young age. When you're making \$60 an hour at 16, you don't think about going to another career – or even taking the SATs. It distorts your view of the world and what you'll do with your life."

*Seventeen* magazine came to town for a Rich's promotion, saw her and put her on the cover when she was 17. Still, even a cover shot didn't propel her modeling career. "It really wasn't important to me at the time, but I couldn't get past the fact I was young and 5-6. I would be modeling at the mart and all the models would go out in couture gowns, and then I'd be in the tennis outfit. I ended up doing the 'sporty' shots."

She was also still at Sylvan High School and on the cheerleading squad. However, in the 10th grade she switched to another high school and didn't make the squad. Her father, a huge Falcons fan, saw an ad for Falcons cheerleaders and encouraged her to try out. "I was 16, looked 18, and made the squad. So I was a Falcons cheerleader but didn't make my high school's squad. That didn't help me make a lot of girlfriends. But my

father would yell at me from the stands and it was fun."

The uniforms were a lot more subdued back then. "It was turtleneck sweaters and jumpers," she said. "Then the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders came in and vamped it up. I got out after three years. I didn't have the cleavage."

She dabbled in the fashion industry after high school, working at the Merchandise Mart but eventually settled for a "boring office job." She was a competitive racquetball player and was at a sports club when the manager offered to introduce her to the Falcons quarterback. "This is so '70s," she says with a laugh. "The court was all windows, and he had three gorgeous girls watching him play. He was viewed as this great bachelor in town. I looked at him and told my friend that Steve was cute, but he didn't need to meet me because he had all these other women."

Anyway, they were eventually introduced and he asked her to go to lunch. She put him off. "He was like 'Excuse me!' He couldn't believe it. But he had like 14 girlfriends, and I wasn't interested. But the fact was that he was so boyish and awkward. He never had to talk to girls because they were always coming to him."

The two met in 1979, married in 1980 and a year-and-a-half later had the first of two sons. "I loved staying at home and being a mom. Looking back, those were the best times," she says. "Steve traveled a lot, and I wanted to be there. I didn't want baby sitters."

But gradually she wanted something of her own. She always had an interest in art and went to local children's hospitals and would ask a child to draw a picture before he or she went in for a chemotherapy treatment. She would copy the drawing and put it on a T-shirt and give it back to the child. "I called my business Wear Me Out, and that was my first venture – children's clothing."

When her younger son was 5, she took a photography class at the Atlanta College of Art. "I always took the family Christmas cards, and people would ask who our photographer was," she says. "I didn't know how to operate a camera really, but the pictures turned out nice. I went once a week to a night class, and that was a big step for me."

Over the next several years she took every photography class she could and started taking pictures of children professionally. "I had strong word of mouth and set up a darkroom in my house. The first time a picture I took came out of the development film I cried. But I felt awkward having people come to my home in Duluth and selling paintings in my dining room, so I wanted my own space. And, that was huge."

Her Buckhead gallery is called Sandee O [her maiden name is Oliver]. "I love my last name, but people would come in with footballs wanting Steve to sign them. It's not about football. I want people to buy my work because they like my work."



Sandee Bartkowski, on the cover of *Seventeen* Magazine

Sandee Bartkowski  
Photographer

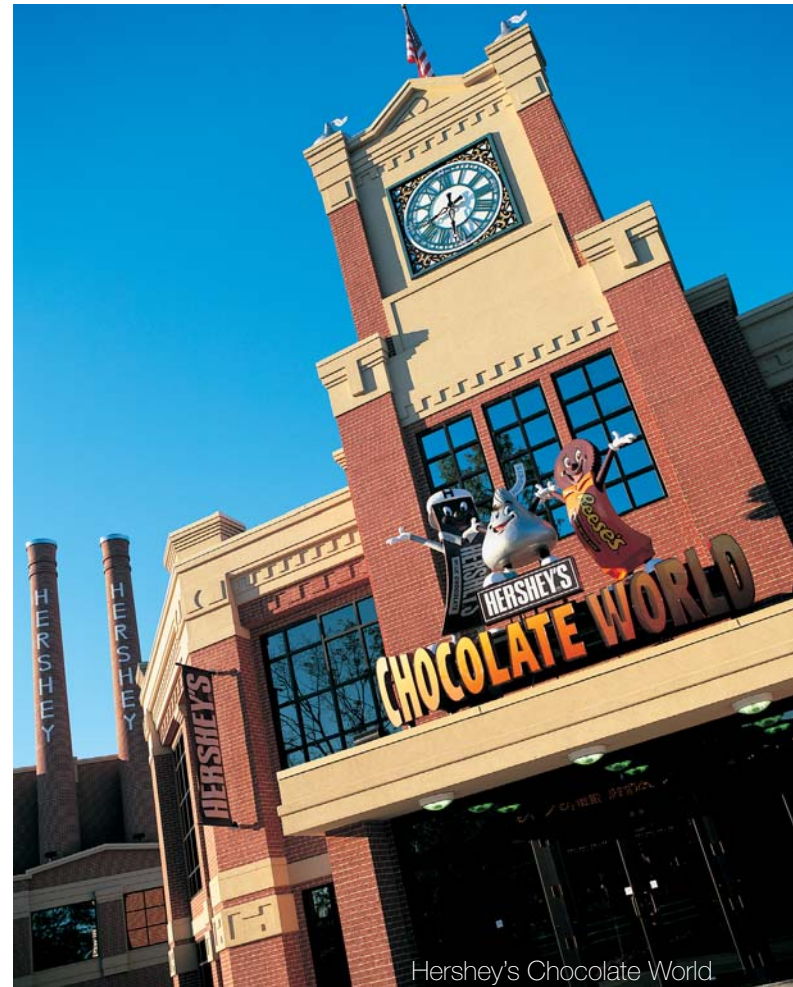
Photography by Sean Cokes



# Take a sweet trip to Hershey

Pennsylvania town has something for everyone, including chocolate spa treatments

By Mary Welch



Hershey's Chocolate World



The Spa at the Hotel Hershey



Hershey Park roller coaster

Disneyland may be the happiest place on Earth, but if you need a break from people who are merely smiling and happy, jump on a plane to Harrisburg, Pa., and drive over to Hershey, which touts itself as the “sweetest place” on the planet.

And with Hershey Kisses all over the place – including on street lamps – visitors can have a great time and a sugar fix. A trip to Hershey is similar to one to the land of Mickey Mouse. At the amusement park, you get animated characters greeting guests – except at Hershey it’s a Hershey chocolate bar or a Twizzlers stick or a Reese’s peanut butter cup. There are lots of rides. In fact, there are more than 60 rides and attractions, including 10 thrilling roller coasters, six drenching water rides and more than two dozen kiddie rides.

The area also has a variety of accommodations, everything from budget to one of the country’s most renowned resorts, The Hotel Hershey. Like Orlando, Hershey attracts quite the convention and sales meeting crowd, so there are plenty of facilities to accommodate the business traveler – and plenty to keep the family occupied while mom has a business meeting.

And to top it all off, the hotel boasts a world-class spa whose products incorporate – you guessed it – chocolate.

There is, however, a different feel to Hershey that goes back

to its founding by Milton Hershey, a real version of Willy Wonka. His chocolate factory opened in 1905, and with his success came a deep sense of moral responsibility to his employees. He created a town with affordable homes, an inexpensive public transportation system, great schools and extensive recreational facilities. As part of his desire to provide recreational facilities, he started a park that included amusement rides and a swimming pool. Hersheypark, in fact, just celebrated its 100th anniversary.

The “Candy Man’s” benevolence still permeates the town, especially since Hershey left his fortune to his foundation to continue helping the town. Despite its growth, it still has the sense of a town built on a utopian philosophy that is heartfelt and real.

Before you even enter Hersheypark, you make a stop at Chocolate World, which is a center full of food, shops and entertainment, all devoted to chocolate. A highlight is the free ride in a coca bean-shaped car that gives you a realistic idea of how chocolate is made, complete with smells, close-up video shots of production lines and free samples. The nearby Hershey Museum covers the history of the product.

After learning how chocolate is made, go down the walkway to Hersheypark, which TripAdvisor® rates as the best amusement park outside of Disney World and with good reason. Prices are

cheaper and lines not nearly as long as at the Florida park.

If you are a fan of roller coasters, then this is the park. The park boasts 10 roller coasters, six of which give a ride described as “aggressive.” Take the Lightning Racer, which is the first racing/dueling coaster in the country. The Lightning Racer has a double wooden track with two staggered lifts of approximately 90 feet per lift, 15 drops at speeds exceeding 50 mph and gravitational forces in excess of 3.6g. The two coasters race side by side and then curve to face each other, creating a “duel.” Just as the riders come face-to-face with the opposing train, the track splits. As the trains race toward the finish line, they speed toward a rushing waterfall; the tracks swerve and the riders avoid being drenched, but are misted by the cooling waters.

Another favorite is the Roller Soaker, which is an ultimate aerial water ride, because it also involves the people on the ground. Yes, the Roller Soaker features water curtains, water blasters, and exploding geysers but here’s the really fun part — each rider can at will dump up to four gallons of water on spectators below, and the spectators can direct huge water sprayers toward the riders, offering a drenching interaction for everyone.

Often named one of the most exciting coaster rides in the

country is the Storm Runner, which will launch you from 0 to 72 mph in two seconds flat, 18 stories straight up and then straight down. And that’s just the beginning.

Let’s just say that it might be better to go on the roller coaster rides, then partake of the goods offered throughout the park.

The park offers many low-key adventures as well as a zoo that Milton Hershey started in 1905 when he rescued 12 prairie dogs and a bear cub. Now called ZooAmerica, the 11-acre park can be visited independently or with a ticket to Hersheypark.

Let’s get back to chocolate – as in the spa. The Hotel Hershey opened the Chocolate Spa in 2004. Guests of the hotel or just visitors can just such treatments as the whipped coca bath, the chocolate fondue wrap and the chocolate sugar scrub. The hotel itself, built by Hershey in 1933, is a wonderful resort and has received the AAA four-diamond award for 27 consecutive years as well as the Mobil four-star distinction for more than 16 years. The hotel boasts 230 guest rooms as well as 23,500 square feet of meeting and banquet space with four certified meeting professionals on the staff to assist.

Even if you have a bit of a sugar overload, there is plenty to do in the area, including visiting the nearby Pennsylvania Dutch country and, a little bit farther, the Gettysburg Civil War battlefield. ♀