



Monday, November 8, 2004

Education

Biomed Rounds: Miss Mass. shifts focus to developing scientists

By Dyke Hendrickson

The MIT grad who represented Massachusetts in the Miss America contest in September is returning to her day job: the WhizKids Foundation.

Actually, it is not only her day job but also her first "real" job.

Erika Ebbel founded and heads the nascent WhizKids Foundation. It is nonprofit Cambridge organization designed to encourage youngsters to take an interest in science.

Specifically, it assists schools in creating science fairs and science clubs, and with helping individual students with projects.

She plans to spend at least a year developing the foundation, in preparation for her (expected) entry into the MIT-Harvard graduate program that offers both an M.D. and Ph.D.

"I'm looking forward to spending time on WhizKids and really developing it," said Ebbel, a California native who graduated in June with a degree in chemistry.

"Many high schools don't have science fairs, which is an activity that I really enjoyed when I was in school. We are trying to make it possible for them to participate in fairs, and also gain a greater appreciation of science."

Ebbel whizzed into public orbit in June, when she was named Miss Massachusetts.

At the state pageant, Ebbel won each of the three divisions of the judging: interview, swimsuit and talent.

Indeed, she is a versatile individual. Ebbel was a member of the university's pistol club and emerged as a top shooter with a .22 caliber. She is an accomplished scuba diver.

Born of parents with ties to both Russia and Japan, she speaks Russian and Japanese. She also chatters in Spanish.

During her high school years, she won the top prize in the California scholastic science fair competition.

At the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City, she won the talent competition. A graduate of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, she used her skills in classical piano to perform a Chopin selection.

So far, so good.

Your Scribe thought that Ebbel had a good chance to make the Final 10 or perhaps win.

I thought that if the Miss America pageant is interested in upgrading its image from glamour pageant to scholarship opportunity, it could have named an articulate MIT graduate as its winner.

But judges, many from the glitzy side of show business, evidently did not have an image remake on the mind.

More than a half-dozen candidates who made the final round were from the Deep South.

That does not make them hair-sprayed dullards, but in the view of Your (provincial) Scribe, they did not offer the versatility and smarts that Ebbel would have brought as a national spokesperson.

"I enjoyed the experience," Ebbel said. "I met people of all kinds and felt satisfied with my performance. I did the best I could and stayed true to myself.

"The title of Miss Massachusetts will give me a good opportunity to network, and help me move WhizKids forward."

Ebbel will spend the coming year as Miss Massachusetts, and in that role will visit many schools and organizations.

It's likely she'll be equally busy with WhizKids.

"Some schools just don't have the resources for a fair," Ebbel said. "In an era when we are trying to get more youngsters involved in science, especially girls, I'm hopeful that this will benefit a lot of kids.

"I think it's possible to spark interest through hands-on projects."

Ebbel is working with school superintendents statewide to develop fairs where they don't exist. She is also working with the Girl Scouts of America to promote the project "Girls Go Tech."

The foundation is not limited to Massachusetts. The program has developed projects in New Hampshire and in Northern California and Nevada.

Ebbel is looking for volunteers and/ or financial support. More information about her program can be found at www.whizkidsfoundation.org.

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