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She's all that

With brains, beauty—and a surprising motive for competing—medical student Judith Eckerle '98 vies for Miss USA

By Sarah Hedgespeth '04

Whether Judith Kim Eckerle '98 wins or loses in the Miss USA pageant, televised nationally on March 24, she will have accomplished an important goal: getting international exposure in her search for her birth parents.

“I think that the more people [in Korea] who get to see me, the better the chance that someone may recognize me,” she said in an interview a month prior to the competition, the results of which were not available at the Magazine’s press time. “If I don’t find anything, I at least want to know that I did everything possible to try.”

[Note: To read about results of the pageant, and Judy Eckerle's reaction, scroll to link at bottom of this page.]

On August 27, 1976, Judith was found, abandoned, one week after her birth, in Seongdong-gu, Seoul, Korea. She was adopted by an American couple from Minnesota in February 1977. Her adoptive father was a U.S. military officer stationed in Korea in the early 1970s during the Vietnam War, and both of her adoptive parents encouraged her to take pride in her Korean heritage, teaching her to sing Korean songs and to celebrate her ethnicity from the time she was a small child. Yet the desire to find her biological parents has remained, and is one of the major reasons Eckerle is so committed to the pageant circuit.

“My dedication to winning Miss Wisconsin stemmed from the need for more publicity in Korea,” Eckerle says. “I had already been on national television four times and in multiple newspapers over in Korea, and I knew without something new and exciting like Miss Wisconsin USA, there would be no other options for continuing my search.”

Since graduating from Illinois Wesleyan, she has made efforts to visit Korea every summer to take Korean language classes provided by Seoul National University and other courses geared toward Korean adoptees. Eckerle has also explored the possibility that her parents may have moved to the United States since her birth, and has pursued coverage in Korean publications within America, but so far she has had no concrete leads to her search.



Although locating her biological parents was initially her motivation for taking part in these high-profile pageants, Eckerle says she truly enjoys competing and sees it as a stress-relieving outlet from her life as a third-year student at the

Medical College of Wisconsin in Milwaukee.

“You have to have some kind of outlet in medical school to keep your sanity and stay grounded,” she says. “Some people mountain bike, and some people are married and maybe have families. This is my outlet.”

From her early childhood experiences of sitting on the couch watching pageants on television, Eckerle thought participating looked like fun. A late bloomer, 26-year-old Eckerle did not decide to begin competing until she was 24, by which time she was too old to compete within the Miss America Organization. So, she decided to go for the title of Miss Wisconsin USA, instead. Her competition in the March Miss USA pageant will only be her third such contest, after competing for Miss Wisconsin USA 2002 and winning the title for 2003 last October.



Adopted as an infant, her Midwestern parents encouraged her to learn about her Korean heritage. At age 6 (above), she was given a traditional Korean hanbok costume. (Photo provided by Judith Eckerle)

Eckerle says she was shy at first about telling others of her “secret” life as a pageant contestant. “I was afraid at first people might think it was frivolous,” she told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel last November, “and I don’t want anyone to think I am not serious about medicine.”

For her first pageant, she told only her parents and an aunt and uncle. By her second pageant, the secret was out among her family, friends, and even faculty and students at her medical school. She had more than 30 devoted fans in the audience waving signs and cheering when she won the crown.

“Everyone I told about the pageant was incredibly supportive,” Eckerle says. “The associate dean of the medical college e-mailed me to wish me luck. The student affairs coordinator and her husband came to the pageant. The school said it would work with my schedule to make it possible for me to do this.”

Eckerle took a two-month leave of absence from medical studies to prepare for the Miss USA pageant, but still has very little downtime. Already enduring a busy travel schedule as Miss Wisconsin USA, she flew to San Antonio, home of the 2003 Miss USA pageant, on March 9. There, she spent 15 days prior to the big event attending charity auctions, community outreach programs, and outings with the other contestants to Sea World, the Hard Rock Cafe, and Six Flags.

Although socializing and traveling are perks for the competitors, there’s also a less glamorous side to preparing for the pageant. In February, Eckerle was working out “about 10 hours a week, mainly lifting weights and some light cardio. I’ve upped my protein by about 30 grams a day,

and all of this because I've always struggled to keep my weight up. So my goal is to gain about 10 to 12 pounds of muscle before I go to Miss USA in March."

Helping Eckerle get her body and her wardrobe ready in time for the big night are a team of professionals worthy of a Hollywood movie star. A personal trainer, a team at a spa, a makeup artist, three pageant directors, a cosmetic dentist and his lab team, an interview coach, and a consultant/dressmaker comprise her invaluable support system.

Everything that goes into getting ready for the pageant makes this a very expensive hobby. Donations from her friends and family, along with sponsorship from an athletic club in Milwaukee, helped fund her participation in Miss Wisconsin. However, Eckerle still faces a lot of out-of-pocket expenses from her participation in Miss USA. She hopes that cutting costs for a while will be enough to ensure she'll be able to pay her pageant bills and still have enough left for her rent. But so far, she's been too busy traveling to dwell much on the downsides of her pageant experience.

A hectic lifestyle is nothing new for Eckerle, who still thinks back on how difficult it was to juggle her demanding double majors of biology and music performance while at Illinois Wesleyan.

"I was overloaded every semester I was at IWU, but the registrar and department heads helped me coordinate things," she says. "I remember Friday nights, practicing in Presser until midnight, going out to meet up with my friends just to say 'Hi' for 30 minutes or so, and then going home to study genetics, and then to bed."

When asked how she thought her Illinois Wesleyan classmates would react to the news that she was a beauty-pageant contestant, Eckerle responds, "I don't know what they would think.

"On one hand, I was a basketball cheerleader and loved performing for the Wind Ensemble and Concerto Aria, but I think people thought I was pretty serious." Since college, she says, "I've gotten out to Asia, Europe, South America; lived for stints on both coasts and overseas; and done two-and-a-half years of med school. That would change anyone, I suppose."

These accomplishments, along with her personality, are what Eckerle hopes will give her an advantage over other Miss USA contestants. She insists such factors do matter, even though the pageant doesn't have a talent portion (unlike the Miss America contest) and has sometimes been criticized for judging its contestants solely on their beauty.

“If you have ever seen Miss USA or Miss Universe on TV, there are these incredibly beautiful women competing for one crown,” she says. “I believe that personality and accomplishments define the contestants that stand out from being beautiful in terms of pure physicality. That is why I think it is absolutely correct to call Miss USA a ‘beauty pageant,’ but only if you take an extra moment to expand the definition you mean when you use the word ‘beauty.’”

Eckerle believes that, because 51 physically beautiful women are all competing for the same title, the interviews are the most important part of the pageant for contestants looking to stand out. Unlike the evening gown and swimsuit portions that do focus on physical appearance, the interviews give judges an opportunity to select a contestant who shows beauty on the inside as well. According to Eckerle, her time at Illinois Wesleyan has helped prepare her for all of these segments of the competition.



Eckerle (above) was crowned Miss Wisconsin USA last year. (Photo courtesy of Miss USA Wisconsin)

“It’s intimidating to get up in front of thousands of people in a swimsuit, but I was in front of people a lot at IWU [while cheerleading and performing in concerts], and that definitely helped,” she says. “Illinois Wesleyan also gave me a wide variety of classes and experiences that help me field the questions they throw at me in interviews.”

Given that such contests tend to attract and reward strong personalities, one might assume that the pageant environment is ripe territory for jealousy and conflicts, making the three weeks the women spend together prior to the March 24 event a potential nightmare. However, Eckerle doubted that would be the case. She swears that most pageant contestants do not fit the backstabbing image so often portrayed by the media and in most people’s imaginations.

“I think any time you throw 51 girls together, there are bound to be some conflicts, pageant or not, right?” Eckerle says. “I’ve heard about some catty behavior at pageants, but honestly, I’ve never seen it myself.”

For instance, Eckerle recalled last year when she showed up to the finals with the wrong shoes, and another contestant who had not made it to the top 10 let her borrow hers.

She has also found a support system in girls she has vied with in the past. Cortney Owen, whom Eckerle competed against in the Miss Wisconsin USA 2002 pageant and who won that year’s title, helped Eckerle as she prepared to compete for the title of Miss Wisconsin USA 2003. And Eckerle was asked to be in the wedding party of another competitor.

Perhaps her painless assimilation into pageant culture is a testament to Eckerle's big heart, one that—coming from an ambiguous past herself—has a special place for children, especially adoptees. Eckerle has made these children her platform in the pageant, and wants to work with adoption groups, parents, and their children. She also hopes to make children from similar backgrounds as hers the focus of her life's work by becoming a pediatrician at an international adoption clinic.

“I recently worked at one in Minneapolis and absolutely loved it,” she says. “There is a similar clinic opening at the children's hospital in Milwaukee that I hope to be involved with. Adoption is something near and dear to my heart, and I can't get enough of kids.”

While helping other children of adoption and their families will be a reward in itself for Eckerle, her fondest wish continues to be reuniting with her own birth parents, and coming together after all the years they have lost. She knows that if she's lucky enough to win Miss USA, she will have an even bigger platform to widen her search by competing in the Miss Universe pageant to be held this May in Panama.

It will be hard, Eckerle admits, to hold her own as she shares the stage on March 24 with some of America's most beautiful women, but she's come up with at least one strategy to gain an edge. She's encouraged family and friends to send her not only words of encouragement, but also “homemade chocolate things of any kind.” As she wrote in an e-mail sent out to her supporters in February, “If you don't know me well, then please know that I will be eating everything and anything I want right up to the time of swimsuit competition.

“It's my strategy for psyching out the competition!”