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Miss Alaska prepares for her big night

VOLUNTEER: Chance encounter led her to help special-needs kids.

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It's about more than the flowers, the sash or the crown for newly appointed Miss Alaska 2006 Stephanie Wonchala. For her, winning the title and the official state preliminary pageant to the Miss America Program, is about taking her passion and hard work to the next level.

Contestants in the Miss Alaska pageant compete in four phases -- an interview that accounts for 25 percent of their overall score, a two-minute talent presentation for 35 percent, a fitness score worth 15 percent, an evening wear score for 20 percent and an onstage question that's worth 5 percent of the competition score. This year's crowning was June 17.

For the four years that Wonchala has competed in the program, her platform has focused on special-needs students. She said it began with an embarrassing encounter in a crowded hallway.

"During my junior year, I was standing in the hallway between class changes and felt a breeze behind me. I turned around and a boy with Down syndrome was lifting up my skirt. I was pretty upset and embarrassed," she said. "But when I eventually visited his classroom, I realized it wasn't that big of a deal. He honestly didn't know any better. A lot of the special-needs students are confined in the same classroom with the same group of students for five years and don't always receive a lot of interaction with the rest of the student population."

Soon after, Wonchala became active in her school's Partners Club, a program of the Special Olympics Alaska organization that pairs disabled students with nondisabled

students in activities in and out of school. Plans to promote her work with special-needs students during her reign as Miss Alaska include spending more time in classrooms throughout the state. Locally, she will work to implement a Partners Club at Fire Lake Elementary School next year.

"I figured if I could be that one person that made a difference or provided a stepping stone that made school a little easier for a special-needs student, it would be worth it." Wonchala began competing in the Miss Alaska competition in 2003 at age 17. That year, she won the award for top interview and earned first runner-up in the competition. She was first runner-up last year as well.

"I believe our time comes when it comes, but I also believe we can make it happen faster with a little hard work," she said. "After last year I went back and evaluated everything about my performance and real-ly buckled down. I kept reminding myself of the Thomas Jefferson quote that said the harder I work, the more luck I seem to have. It stuck with me."

This year the Miss America pageant will move from Atlantic City, N.J., to Las Vegas. In addition, the event's broadcast partner, Country Music Television, will host seven nights of preliminary rounds beginning Sept. 5 in Los Angeles. Cameras will also follow contestants behind the scenes, during their preparations and interactions with each other and event staff. The preliminaries will be packaged as seven "Finding Miss America" shows, and each will feature seven or eight of the 52 contestants. They will be broadcast before the crowning episode, scheduled for January 2007.

The change in format of the Miss America pageant doesn't faze Wonchala.

"I see it as a way that I can take my platform outside of Anchorage and Eagle River," she said. "I think the reality-show feel to the pageant will be an excellent way to get Miss Alaska on an even playing field with the rest of the contestants. With community support and the opportunity for the public to vote for their favorites, Alaska can be a weighty competitor."

To prepare for the Miss America event, Wonchala spends up to two hours a day working out.

"They upped the percentage of the swimsuit competition," she said. "So being in shape is really important."

In addition, she takes piano lessons daily and uses her family and boyfriend to sharpen her communication skills.

"I spend countless nights standing behind an ironing board while they ask me questions," she said. "This is my fancy training and preparation for the pageant." According to Carla Stephenson, executive director of the Miss Alaska Scholarship Pageant, the answers to the onstage questions the contestants provide aren't necessarily as important as the delivery.

"The interviews aren't debates. The judges want to see how well they form their own opinions and want to see how well they can articulate their point of view," she said.

"They also might try to throw out a controversial question to see how the contestant handles adversarial viewpoints."

Stephenson said the Miss Alaska pageant seeks contestants from all walks of life and with all sorts of talent.

"The pageant welcomes variety," she said. "All they need to be is well-rounded and comfortable with themselves."

Wonchala maintains a Web site at www.stephaniewonchala.com for friends and family.

"I keep links to articles and exciting things that are happening on the site," she said.

"But I can't guarantee it will always be up to date because I do all of the maintenance myself."

For more information about the Miss Alaska Pageant, visit www.missalaskapageant.com or call 748-8817.

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Illustration:

Photo 1: MissAk_062806.jpg

Photo 2: Reading_062806.jpg

Photo courtesy of Apogee Studios

Stephanie Wonchala, Miss Alaska 2006, often practices for her time in the limelight by having family members fire questions at her while she stands behind an ironing board.

Courtesy of Stephanie Wonchala

Stephanie Wonchala reads to students recently at Fire Lake Elementary School. After an experience with a special-needs student, she began volunteering in her school's Partners Club.

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