Ms. Wheel Chair Iowa

Samantha Edwards
Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos/vol2009/iss4/11

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Publications at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ethos by an authorized editor of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
The Beauty pageants stir images of women strutting around in extravagant gowns and reciting their desire for world peace. Glitter, spinning batons and a revealing swimsuit competition. Other pageants operate on a completely different level. Introducing Ashley Lerch, Ms. Wheelchair Iowa 2008 and Ms. Wheelchair America second runner-up.

By Samantha Edwards
The Ms. Wheelchair competition, operating on both a state- and nation-wide level, was started in 1972 by a physician who wanted to showcase the accomplishments of people with mobility impairments, as well as advocate for the 52 million Americans living with a disability.

Advocating for Americans with disabilities is something Lerch began at an early age. After a farm accident as a child left her paralyzed, 2007 Iowa State alumna Lerch started looking at the accident as an opportunity to educate others about farm safety awareness.

“One of the biggest things that I did—and I’m proud to say [it]—was serve as a delegate for the National Safe Kids Summit, which was held in Washington D.C.,” Lerch said. “We met with our state representatives and our legislators and talked about our safety concerns [regarding farm machinery and operations].”

Iowa State was Lerch’s next launching pad for advocacy. As a student majoring in genetics and psychology, Lerch was the president of Iowa State’s Alliance for Disability Awareness (ADA) and was involved in the Got Ignorance Campaign. As a member of the Campus Climate and Orientation Committee, Lerch offered suggestions to campus officials on how to make the campus more wheelchair accessible.

After graduation, she searched for positions that met her interests and was hired as a program assistant for the student disability office at University of Northern Iowa.

It was while at UNI that Lerch decided to enter the Ms. Wheelchair Iowa Pageant. Contestants, ranging in age from 21 to 60, must use a wheelchair for 100 percent of mobility. Before the competition, a $50 entry fee is required of the contestant or their sponsor, and contestants must develop a platform.

“My office sponsored me with the inside joke that my platform would be the transition [from high school to college], which is actually what I ended up [using as a platform],” Lerch said.

Besides a contestant’s advocacy efforts, judges look at the contestants’ achievements and ambitions. Lerch exemplified her ambitious spirit by getting involved in everything from high school track to choir and band (including through her freshman year at Iowa State).

“One of the major things that I liked was that our [high school] band was invited to an Independence Day parade, Lerch said. “That was just a great time because I got to show people ‘this is how you adapt marching band so you can include individuals with disabilities’.”

The Ms. Wheelchair Pageant lacks the traditional pageant talent or beauty components. The entire focus of the pageant is on awareness.

“The only perk is that you get the title and you get to meet a lot of wonderful people and spread awareness,” Lerch said. “There isn’t any monetary award with it. It’s much more [about] dedication.”