

A year in the life of a National Cherry Queen

BY SARAH HENRY

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Life is just a bowl of cherries for Ashley Prusick. The 21-year-old 2002 National Cherry Queen juggles the many tasks associated with her royal duties, keeping up her grades at Michigan State University and holding down a job for congressman Dave Camp.

And she does it all with a smile, appearing completely at ease and composed in a cherry-print halter dress and dangling cherry earrings.

"There are times when it's difficult," she said. "This is a huge commitment. You live, breathe and eat this industry, but I loved it."

After admiring the National Cherry Queen since she was a tot, Prusick decided to apply for the sought-after position herself.

"It's really been a part of this community and a part of me since I was very very young," she said.

With the end of her royal reign coming to a close, Prusick has some advice for the five women vying for the 2003-2004 National Cherry Queen position.

"Be yourself and commit to yourself," she said. "You have to want this because it's not just a pretty crown. It's a job and a position that you commit to for a full year."

Though her time is virtually up as Cherry Queen, Prusick fully intends to stay involved both with the cherry industry and the Festival. Whether she's an ambassador or placing in the cherry pie eating contests, Prusick will be a familiar face for years to come.

"I came in second place (of the pie eating contest) last year," she said. "My dad was so proud. He put the video camera right in my face and I had cherry pie up my nose."

Prusick and her father, Vince Prusick, team up to promote the health benefits of cherries.

Her father, an orthopedic surgeon in Traverse City helps many patients who suffer from arthritis.

The Cherry Relief gel tab, developed by Bob



Record-Eagle file photo

Reigning National Cherry Queen Ashley Prusick.

Underwood, a local cherry farmer, plays a major role in decreasing the symptoms of arthritis and can even help prevent and fight against certain types of cancer. When taken, it is the equivalent to eating 40 tart cherries, Prusick said.

"The antioxidants and melatonin within the cherries are higher than (in) any other fruit," Prusick said. "It's not even comparable."

Cherries are known to have about 15 different antioxidants.

"Oftentimes if you take this cherry pill for 45 days, it will give you the same benefits without a lot of the medical side effects that some of the drugs will," she said.

Prusick said tart cherries, particularly the Mount Morency variety have the highest levels of anti-inflammatory properties.

"A lot of people think all you can do with cherries is bake a pie or put them on a

sundae," she said. "So we try to put an emphasis on the health benefits."

Prusick has traveled the country, dropping dried cherries into the hands of those she meets on the way. She made a guest appearance on the "Today Show" in New York City, armed with a 35 pound cherry pie, and appeared on a local ABC morning show in the city, totaling in about \$1 million of advertising time.

"The New York growers that we met in New York City said I've done more for the New York industry in a

week than they have in the last 10 years," she said.

She visited Washington DC to work with the legislature for disaster relief for farmers, and appeared on Norwegian, Japanese and Chinese television.

She also visited the "Tonight Show" in Los Angeles, and attended the Rose Bowl.

Of all the events Prusick has attended, however, her favorite was the Special Olympics in Mt. Pleasant.

"I just really enjoyed working with the kids," she said. "They were so excited to see me; the crown is like, 'Oh, my gosh' to them. I wasn't the star there, they were the stars."

Prusick and her Queen candidates enjoy a college scholarship underwritten in part by Huntington National Bank and a new wardrobe, provided by Yonkers. This year, the Queen's Coronation Ball is hosted by the Grand Traverse Resort and Spa.

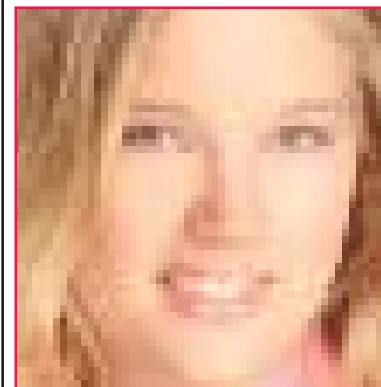
Meet the 2003 National Cherry Queen Finalists



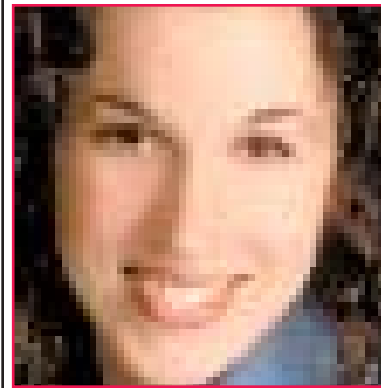
Megan Brown, 18, of Traverse City, is the daughter of Michael and Nancy Brown of Traverse City. She is a student at Michigan State University, where she is majoring in journalism, with an emphasis in public relations. Brown enjoys playing basketball and volleyball and traveling. Last year she sang with the Michigan State University State Singers.



Brandee Clark, 22, of Traverse City, is the daughter of David and Mary Clark of Traverse City. A student at Grand Valley State University, her major is in psychology and special education. Clark plays piano, flute and has 10 years experience in gymnastics and dance. She is a member of the Council for Exceptional Children and enjoys running and golf.



Brandi McClain, 21, of Grayling, is the daughter of Dave and Gayle McClain of Grayling. She is a student at the University of Michigan, where she is majoring in Spanish and English. Her hobbies include golfing, teaching aerobics, dancing, traveling, cooking, reading and volunteering. She is also a spokeswoman for the U.S. division of "In the First Place."



Kelly Plucinski, 21, is the daughter of Gary and Karen Plucinski of Williamsburg. She attends Oakland University, where she is majoring in theater performance. She volunteers at Cherryland Humane Society and has participated for two years in the "Tour de Cure" bike ride for diabetes.



Kinsley Robinson, 23, is a Traverse City native and the daughter of Robert and Judy Robinson. She is a student at Michigan State University, where she is majoring in communications, with an emphasis on public relations. She has experience in jazz, ballet and modern dance, as well as public speaking, and has participated in leadership and mentor programs.