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At Miss Cass Pageant, Disabled Contestants Bask in the Spotlight

Knock-Knock Jokes, Songs And a Tiara in Detroit; 'They Live for This Day'

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By **JEFFREY ZASLOW** | Staff Reporter of **THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**

DETROIT -- At a beauty pageant last week, one contestant's talent was reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. Though she mistakenly placed her left hand over her right side, she got a standing ovation when she ad-libbed, "God bless the soldiers!"

Another contestant handled the crucial interview segment with aplomb. She was asked: "Whom do you love or like?" She thought for a long moment, smiled broadly and replied, "My family!" The crowd erupted in applause.

The annual Miss Cass Pageant is unlike any other beauty contest most people have ever seen. A competition for women with developmental disabilities, it's an event that makes some outsiders ill at ease. But organizers deeply believe it is uplifting and empowering for these women of all ages who have spent much of their lives in state hospitals or group homes.

"All the things we use to mark our lives, they don't have," says Faith Fowler, pastor at Cass Community United Methodist Church, who oversees the nine-year-old pageant. These mentally challenged women are unlikely to ever marry or have children, to wear a prom dress, to get a job or retire from it, she says. "They live for this day when all eyes are on them."



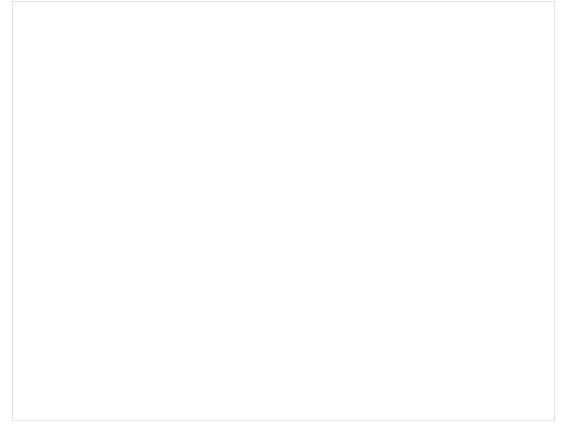
Courtesy of C&B Scene

Miss Cass 2003, Carla Patrick, left, and Betty Fiero, who won this year's crown

Each year, the pageant's audience is effusively supportive, though the crowd can't help but giggle as the contestants, ages 21 to 75, sing off-key or struggle through halting knock-knock jokes. The interview portion is simple. One contestant last year was asked, "What is your favorite color?" She responded, "chicken," and everyone laughed.

Many attendees are family members or caregivers, and they are comfortable with such laughter, which they say is

loving. They see the pageant as a way to help everyone, including contestants, confront their assumptions about talent, beauty and brainpower. For those whose



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impulses might be to patronize or pity, the pageant shows that the contestants "are people with feelings, desires and ambitions, just like us," says caregiver Stacy Leigh. "Maybe you're embarrassed to make eye contact when you see them at the mall. This is an opportunity to take a good look."

The pageant is a project of Cass Community Social Services, also headed by Ms. Fowler, which serves residents in the area around Detroit's Cass Avenue. Known as "the Cass Corridor," it is one of the nation's most impoverished neighborhoods.

Some national advocacy groups for the mentally challenged say the Miss Cass Pageant needs to walk a fine line. There is concern that the laughter be supportive, not mocking, says Steve Eidelman, executive director of the Arc (formerly the Association for Retarded Citizens). Peter Kinzler, a vice president of Voice of the Retarded, says contestants' time might be better spent learning job skills than dance routines. Many of them do get job-training at Cass.

Louise Travis, a member of the church here and a pageant supporter, says she has friends who consider the event exploitative. She keeps telling them, "I can't explain it. You've just got to come."

Over the years, as more believers drag somewhat uneasy newcomers to see the pageant, the audience has grown from a couple dozen to a full house of 300 in the church's sanctuary. What attendees saw this year was a spectacle of high drama and strong emotions, especially from the reigning queen, Carla Patrick.

Ms. Patrick, who is 23, won last year after enthusiastically dancing to the Britney Spears song "Baby One More Time." Educationally, she functions at about age 6. Her developmental problems most likely resulted because her mother used drugs while pregnant, her caregivers say. Her mother was murdered in 1996.

"Now she thinks she's real beautiful and smart and special," says Willie Mae Connor, who lives in a group home with Ms. Patrick. "I've seen her wearing the crown at home."

Reigning queens have an adjustment to make when successors are named, and Ms. Patrick admitted she was sad as this year's pageant got under way. She said she wanted to hug her mom.

As Ms. Patrick sat on her throne, this year's 20 contestants kicked off the pageant by dancing to the song "Be Our Guest" from Disney's "Beauty and the Beast," along with tuxedo-clad male clients of Cass. The dance was uncomplicated -- delivered with big smiles and a few awkward Rockettes-style kicks -- but Cass caregivers were floored by the performance.

Ms. Leigh says that many of the people she works with can take many months to learn new skills, even simple things like tying shoes. But, she says, "they learned this dance in a month, because their motivation was so high about the pageant. It shows that if we raise expectations, they can meet them." Ms. Fowler, 45, applies this same philosophy to other creative Cass programs, such as a choir of formerly homeless men that travels the state.

Though the pageant doesn't have a swimsuit segment, there is an evening-gown competition, with contestants wearing donated prom and bridesmaids' dresses. For the pageant's talent portion this year, one woman sang a version of "Kumbaya" that went on far longer than anyone had expected. Another danced to "Come See About Me," snapping her fingers, swinging her ponytail and ending with a crowd-pleasing shimmy.

The loudest competitor offered a rendition of "Jesus Loves Me." Another contestant did the electric slide by concentrating on the footsteps of a Cass staffer who danced at her side.

Betty Fiero, 69, sang "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" in a strong voice that soared

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through the church. Suffering from schizophrenia, she lived in a state mental institution until it closed in the 1980s. She ended up homeless, and in 1995, Cass workers finally coaxed her in to bathe her and give her fresh clothing. Always cradling a stuffed animal, she is known as "Teddy Bear Betty."

She was named a top-10 finalist. During the interview segment, she was asked to name her favorite restaurant. "McDonald's," she said.

Geraldine Green, 59, had to tell the audience her favorite activity at Cass. She replied, "Helping other people."

"That's a Miss America answer!" said the emcee.

When it was time for Ms. Patrick to deliver her last words as Miss Cass, she froze at the microphone. After a long pause, she said only, "I'm glad to be Miss Cass," then she stepped away, overcome with emotion.

"She represented us very well," Ms. Fowler told the crowd.

The judges' scores were finally tabulated. The winner: Betty Fiero.

As always, some also-ans cried, but that was OK with Ms. Fowler, who disagrees with suggestions that all contestants win the title. She likes the life lessons that come from losing and trying again next year.

Ms. Patrick, though, was very reticent about giving up her crown, and ended up sobbing in Ms. Fowler's arms. She explained that she no longer felt special. "It hurts," she said.

At the reception after the pageant, with the Miss Cass tiara on her head, Ms. Fiero put her arm around the outgoing beauty queen.

"I like sharing our lives together," she said to Ms. Patrick. "You're still famous and you're still my friend."

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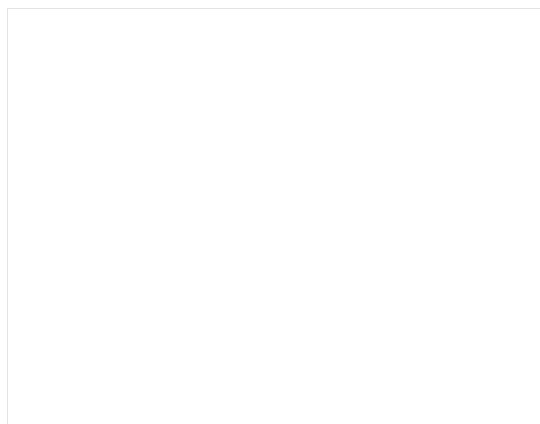
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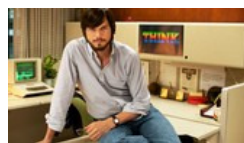
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