

# Disabled Contestants Bask in Pageant's Spotlight

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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 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. Dur-

ing 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-rans 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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