

BRIDGEPORT ELEMENTARY FIFTH-GRADER KENNEDY HJELTE CLAIMS HER CROWN

MEET MISS OREGON PRE-TEEN QUEEN

By SAUNDRA SORENSON
The Times

This year's Miss Oregon Pre-Teen Queen hails from Tualatin and aspires to become an author and monster truck driver.

Eleven-year-old Kennedy Hjelte is, after all, a fan of variety: The fifth-grader at Bridgeport Elementary had been more focused on soccer, and had tried her hand at basketball and Girl Scouts, before she was tempted to go the pageant circuit a few years ago.

Her mother, Amera, a buyer at Nike, was receptive to the idea.

"The way we looked at it, we wanted to help her with confidence," Amera said. Amera felt a competition that called for poise and public speaking would be beneficial.

After participating last year, Kennedy's approach to this year's National American Miss pageant was strategic.

"My goal for the pageant was to make top 15," Kennedy explained. "I started the pageant last year, just to get the feel of it. This year, I decided that was my goal."

Amera recalls a range of reactions backstage last year, with some contestants crying when they hadn't placed high enough. But Kennedy was unshaken.

"What made me let Kennedy do it again was last year during the pageant, going through it for the first time, being backstage and seeing how different people reacted, what they were experiencing and how they handled themselves. She said, before she went onstage, 'Mom, even if I just get the state pageant trophy, I feel really good about how I did, and I had so much fun, I really want to do it next year.' I thought it was a really good attitude."

Amera admits her family was completely new to pageant culture when they began the process last year. Separately, she and Kennedy cite "Toddlers and Tiaras" as a reference point. They found the reality television show, which documents the lives of child beauty pageant contestants and their often hard-driving families, sensationalistic and not a fitting depiction of Kennedy's pageant experience.

As Kennedy points out, contestants in her age category are not allowed to wear make-up or fake eyelashes.

"It's very age-appropriate," Amera said of the competition.

Some aspects of the pageant, like the formal wear presentation, bring to mind the more famous Miss America brand. Contestants in National American Miss gain points for participating in a community service project NAM sponsors, and are also as-

sessed on a personal introduction and one-on-one interviews with each of the eight pageant judges.

Kennedy was asked about her favorite books and movies — she's a fan of "The Elegance of a Hedgehog" by Muriel Barbery, and enjoys the eerie feel of Tim Burton flicks. She was self-possessed and well-rounded, but Kennedy still describes winning top title in her age group as "shocking."

"I didn't know what to do up there," she said. "They said my name, and I started crying, but in my head, I was really laughing."

The National American Miss pageants are state-to-state, with a national competition in November. The Hjelte family will support Kennedy during the Thanksgiving weekend pageant in Anaheim, Calif.

"Kennedy's finding out she has all these responsibilities," her father Jeff, said. "Winning was great, but that's a small part." Now, he said, she must focus on her duty to "be positive in the community, to bring visibility to the pageant."

"I've actually gained a lot more confidence from the pageant," Kennedy said. "Before, I wouldn't like getting up on stage and talking to people. Now, I'm fine with that. And actually, I think I am sitting up a little straighter now."



TIMES PHOTO: JAIME VALDEZ

Kennedy Hjelte models her Miss Oregon Pre-Teen Queen tiara and sash in her Tualatin home.