

# A Beauty Queen with Cerebral Palsy

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By Sharon Cotliar

## **Diagnosed at age 2, Abbey Curran wants other girls like her to know they can compete like anyone else**

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Abbey Curran, 20  
Kewanee, Ill.

Growing up on a hog farm in northwestern Illinois, Abbey Curran used to love watching the local beauty queens parade across the stage at the Henry County Fair. "They were so beautiful," she recalls. "I wanted to be like them." But Abbey was different: Born with cerebral palsy, she wore leg braces until age 10 and limped, dragging her left foot behind her. One day in high school, she saw a flyer announcing the contest. "Oh, Abbey," a teacher told her. "Be realistic. You can't do that."

That was all Abbey needed to hear. She entered and lost, then won another local beauty pageant the following year. Today the 20-year-old is the reigning Miss Iowa USA and on April 11 (NBC, 9 p.m.) competes with 50 other young women for the Miss USA title. The first Miss USA contestant ever with cerebral palsy or any disability—except for one hearing-impaired young woman in 1999—Abbey says, "I hope America doesn't see a girl who walks differently. I hope they see someone who can compete like anyone else."

That's a message Abbey wants a younger generation to hear. In 2004, having

raised funds from local donors, she held her first Miss You Can Do It pageant, for disabled girls and young women, in the auditorium of her Kewanee, Ill., high school. So far about 65 girls with conditions ranging from cerebral palsy to Down syndrome have competed, traversing a stage decorated with glittery stars and clouds. "I want the girls to have a chance to feel beautiful without having to worry about what others think," Abbey says. David Wisley of Peoria, Ill., whose 8-year-old, Samantha, has CP, says winning the Little Miss You Can Do It title last year "was one of the best days of her life."

Diagnosed at 2 with mild cerebral palsy, Abbey learned to live with a condition that affects muscle control and coordination in about 764,000 Americans; often resulting from brain damage before birth, it can leave people unable to walk or speak in its most severe form. In Abbey's case heel-cord lengthening surgery and years of physical therapy improved her walking, though her limp remains and she sometimes loses her balance. Fortunately, she says, "my friends have always been there to lend an arm when I needed." The only child of Mike, a farmer, and Katie, a nurse, Abbey mowed the lawn, fed the hogs and did other farm chores. "We didn't cut her much slack," says Katie, now divorced from Abbey's father. One indulgence: Whenever beauty pageants were on TV, Abbey, with her mom and grandmother, would take up pencil and notebook to "judge" the contestants. "To a girl like me, who was always in jeans, they looked so elegant," Abbey says.

And now she is one of them. Still a farmer's daughter at heart, the 5'5" brunette cracks up during a recent rehearsal at Las Vegas's Planet Hollywood Resort & Casino when a pageant photographer asks her to strike a sexy pose for a glamour shot. "She has a great personality," says Abbey's roommate Vincenza Carrieri-Russo, the 23-year-old Miss Delaware. At a pool party for contestants, she says, the first one to jump in and get wet on a chilly night was Miss Iowa. "She is so determined. Nothing can stop her," says Carrieri-Russo.

To get in shape, Abbey works out five times a week on a stair stepper that she can lean on, as opposed to a treadmill, and has sworn off her beloved mint-chip ice cream. "Win or lose, there's a sundae waiting for me after this!" she says. She walks best in sneakers, but for pageants she dons heels—manageable 2-in. platforms rather than the 4- and 5-in. skyscrapers other girls favor. And when it comes time to take the stage, she'll lean on a designated escort. "I'm going to do the best walk I can, and hopefully that'll be good enough," she says matter-of-

factly.

A sophomore public-relations major at St. Ambrose University in Davenport, Iowa, she dreams of becoming a commercial pilot and has started taking flying lessons. Others have told her it's a long shot; that only motivates her more. For now, she's focused on nailing her on-air interview and looking great in the swimsuit competition. "I'd love to win," she says, "but honestly, I'm so happy I got to be here. I believe it's the heart that matters the most, then I'll worry about the hair."

Know a hero? Send suggestions to [HEROESAMONGUS@PEOPLEMAG.COM](mailto:HEROESAMONGUS@PEOPLEMAG.COM)

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