

Baker

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from the tears," she said. Ashlei learned after the pageant that her win was also historic. She was the first African American girl in her age category to capture the title.

The confidence that Ashlei has gained from her win will come in handy. She will represent the state in the national pageant, which will be held Thanksgiving weekend at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Fla.

Like the state pageant, the Miss American Preteen pageant will place special emphasis on the young women's leadership skills and focus on self-confidence and positivism. The pageant also has a strict no-makeup rule and prohibits short, revealing outfits.

Ashlei's mother admits to being a little wary of the idea of her daughter being in a pageant at first, but as she gained more knowledge about the pageant's mission, all that changed.

"The more I learned about the pageant, the more willing I was to allow her to participate. ... The rules are very specific," said Amber Baker.

Their similar sounding names and even more similar looking faces lead many people to mistake Amber and Ashlei for sisters. Though Baker says her relationship with her only child is more parental than sisterly, she says the two of them do have a strong bond - a bond that has been developed over the 13 years as the two of them have endured highs and lows.

"I've worked very hard to provide her with a lot of things, in spite of the fact that we have had to come through some hardships," said Baker, who has been a single parent for much of Ashlei's life. "It's hard to keep your child positive when you are surrounded by so much negativity."

While most youngsters would cringe at the very idea of their parents talking publicly about the lean years, Ashlei sits with her head held high as her mother

talks about the family's odyssey.

Baker graduated from North Forsyth High School, the school she wants Ashlei to attend next year, and then went to Howard University in Washington. She got pregnant with Ashlei during her senior year and left school. Stints on public assistance and stays in unsavory neighborhoods would follow.

But the Baker women prevailed.

Amber Baker went back to school and finished her undergraduate work at Winston-Salem State University; she has since earned a master's degree from Ohio State University and is currently working toward her doctorate.

Baker says when she gives her daughter pep talks on subjects like sex and education, she speaks to her from experience. Ashlei says talking is an activity that more parents and children should partake in together.

"You always remember what your parents say. You may not listen at the time they say it, but you always remember what they say," Ashlei said.

She is the student-body president at Philo Middle School, as well as a solid A/B student. Ashlei also runs track and is a cheerleader. And she has been a fluent Spanish speaker for much of her life.

Ashlei has dreams of one day being a lawyer, but first she wants a shot at an Olympic gold medal.

"She is probably one of the best students we have," said William Peay, principal of Philo. "If I were to have a daughter, I would want my daughter to be like Ashlei."

Peay says Ashlei has grown a lot during her years at Philo; she has gained the respect of the faculty as well as the students, which was cemented with her election as student body president.

The school and Flow Motors will sponsor the car that Ashlei will wave from during the Winston-Salem State University Homecoming Parade next week-

end. Ashlei breaks into laughter as she demonstrates the classic beauty queen wave - straight open hand and slight twisting of the wrist.

Philo staffers are so impressed by Ashlei, they also passed information about her on to the People to People Student Ambassador Program. She was one of 36 student ambassadors from the Triad who traveled to the United Kingdom in June and July for 21 days. The excursion took the group to London, Dublin, Wales and Bath.

Ashlei said she enjoyed the trip for the most part, but it was not all rosy.

"It was too long to be away from home, and (the British) don't put enough seasoning on their food. ... The only food that was good were the rolls," she said, twisting her face in disgust.

Ashlei missed American food so much that she instructed her mother to bring a box of Bojangles chicken when she picked her up from the airport in Charlotte.

One of Ashlei's host families got her tickets to view the royal wedding of Britain's Prince Edward to Sophie Rhys-Jones. Ashlei was one of a select few who got a chance to stand outside of the church and watch as royal family and other celebrity guests made their way in and out of the church.

"She looks so much like Princess Diana," Ashlei said of Rhys-Jones. "She had little pearls on her veil. ... It was so pretty."

Ashlei also got a glimpse at Prince William and Prince Harry, Diana's sons, as they made their way out of the church.

"They did not look happy to be there. ... They weren't smiling that much," she recalled.

Ashlei and her mother are looking into a program that gives students the opportunity to visit Soweto. Ashlei is keeping her fingers crossed about the possibility of visiting Africa in the near future.

Though the possibilities for Ashlei are unlimited, the family's purse strings are not. Baker, who

works as a secretary while working on her dissertation, says she never wants money, or lack of it, to stand in the way of things that Ashlei wants to do.

Her trip and her sophisticated pageant attire were made possible through the generosity of family members and friends. Realizing her potential, they have also set up the Ashlei Baker Education Fund at Mechanics and Farmers Bank.

Baker is currently trying to sell ads of support for Ashlei that will run in the program for the national pageant. The money generated from the ads will help the Bakers cover room and board expenses in Florida. Air fare is being provided by the state pageant. Baker says if she doesn't raise the money through ads, she'll hold a fish fry. One way or the other she'll make sure Ashlei is there, Baker said.

Although the competition will be steeper and the stakes much higher, the Bakers are already claiming victory. It's the same positive thinking and outlook that got them out of the hard times. Ashlei is already making plans with what she'll do with the \$5,000 cash award. Of course most of it will go toward college, but she wants to give \$2,000 of it to her church, St. Peter's World Outreach Center, to help with its renovation efforts. The church has been supportive of her in every way possible, Baker said.

But ultimately, Baker said, it is really not important if Ashlei wins in Florida. Her only requirement has always been that her daughter simply do her best. If her best means C's instead of A's on school work, that's fine, Baker said.

"I don't push her. She is goal-oriented enough on her own," Baker said as Ashlei looked on smiling. "I'm proud to say that I like my daughter, not just love her but actually like her."

Those who want to contribute toward ads for Baker can specify that when making contributions to the education fund.

The Chronicle's e-mail address is:

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Juveniles

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"There is no way they are going to be successful in life."

Loretta Biggs, assistant U.S. attorney and a former state District Court judge, agrees with Reingold that, traditionally, Juvenile Court judges had little control over parents. The recent changes in the juvenile laws aim to address such problems as parents who are not living up to their responsibilities.

"The hope is it means no child will be before the court without support from the parent," Biggs said.

In addition to requiring that parents or guardians attend Juvenile Court hearings with their children, the new regulations give judges the power to order parents to attend parent responsibility classes.

"Failure to be involved in the academic world often leads them (juveniles) to be involved in criminal acts," Biggs said.

The intent of the law is not to adversely affect the parents who are doing everything they can to ensure that their children go to school, but to impose responsibilities on the parents who are not living up to their responsibilities, Biggs said.

Kaye Greenwood, court counselor supervisor with the Office of Juvenile Justice, said other changes include:

- The court can order the parent(s) to participate in the child's evaluation or treatment.

- The parent can be ordered to pay for the cost of the evaluation or treatment. If the parent cannot afford to pay, the county can be ordered to pay.

- The parent can be ordered to pay child support if, for example, the child is placed in a group home or wilderness camp.

- The parent can be ordered to pay a probation fee for the child.

- The parent can be ordered to turn his child's medical bills into the parent's private insurance company if, for example, the child is in a group home or detention center.

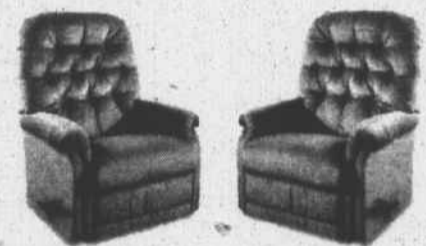
- An employer may not discharge, demote or discipline a parent for attending Juvenile Court hearings with his child.

Greenwood said the new regulations apply to juveniles who are delinquent or undisciplined, which includes truants, children who get in trouble with a law, runaways and ungovernable children.

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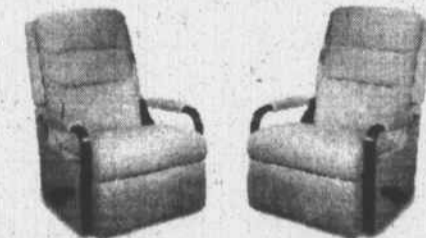
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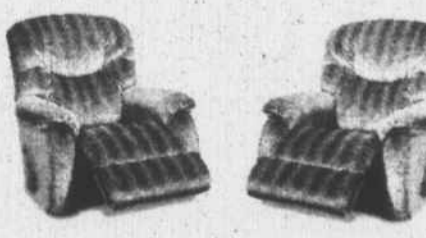
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