

N.C. pageant winner to vie for Miss USA

BY KELLY OCHS
STAFF WRITER

Ashley Puleo always has loved trying new things.

As an undergraduate at Emory University, she ran varsity track and played varsity volleyball.

Sporting safety gear, she's handled anthrax while working at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

And competing in the Miss USA competition in Los Angeles, where the pageant's new winner will be crowned April 12, is another path she's pioneering.

Puleo, who left for California on Saturday, is a first-year student in UNC's School of Dentistry. In October, she was crowned Miss North Carolina USA, a title that allows her to compete for the Miss USA crown.

Though she competed in a few pageants when she was young, Puleo said she was a little bit shy



Miss North Carolina USA Ashley Puleo is a first-year student in the UNC School of Dentistry.

when judges asked her questions. "I was never good when I was little," she said.

But she's come a long way from the girl who once froze when a judge asked her what her favorite television show was.

Puleo said pageants have helped her build confidence, a skill she needs to carry out the responsibilities of Miss North Carolina USA. Her father, Joel Puleo, also attributed his daughter's heightened confidence to the competitions, which he described as great opportunities for young women to promote themselves.

"It's no surprise to me that (the Miss North Carolina USA) judges saw what I saw 25 years ago," he said.

The oldest of six children, Ashley Puleo said her family experience has taught her how to relate to many age groups. "I'm just as versed on those things on Nickelodeon as I am on breast cancer," she said.

Since being crowned, she has attended innumerable benefit luncheons, and all the traveling has made the state seem much smaller, she said.

But, beyond the parades, Ashley Puleo, who received her undergraduate degree in sociology from Emory, has traveled throughout the state to champion issues.

Relying on her master's degree in public health from Emory and her work toward a master's degree in dentistry, she has visited several elementary schools to teach chil-

dren how to brush their teeth correctly.

Crest contributed to her efforts by supplying toothpaste for the children to take home.

"If it takes me having a crown on my head for them to listen ... so be it," she said.

Alecia Hardy, also a first-year dentistry student, said Ashley Puleo is humble in spite of all her accomplishments. Her title rarely comes up in conversation when she first meets people.

"It took me a while before I found out a lot of the things she had done," Hardy said.

Hardy said Ashley Puleo is extremely busy, and, in addition to attending classes and juggling the duties of her position, she sometimes goes to the gym twice a day. "She would be studying while she was on the bike," Hardy said.

Ashley Puleo said she has to be extremely organized to balance her

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ASHLEY PULEO, MISS NORTH CAROLINA USA

schedule. "If I ever lose my cell phone or (my planner), I'm in deep trouble," she said.

She is more excited than she is nervous about the Miss USA Competition. Her dress is being custom-made, and all her clothes were shipped to Los Angeles so that she would have them when she arrived.

Some friends and family will come to cheer her on during the preliminary night when all 51 competitors will be present.

During the evening, Ashley Puleo will be judged based on evening wear and bathing suit

competitions and a personal interview.

Before she left for Los Angeles, Ashley Puleo said that being crowned Miss North Carolina USA doesn't define her any more than other things she's done. But she was looking forward to her trip and was especially excited about a possible visit to "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno."

"The sky's the limit in Los Angeles," she said. "I have my entire life to be a dentist. I have just this one shot to be Miss USA."

Contact the Features Editor at features@unc.edu.

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