

V N N W H T

A puzzling but very fortune(ate) spin of the wheel

By MEMSY PRICE
Staff Writer

Some believe she's the newest doll to hit America since Barbie. She claps, she turns, she smiles . . . and she's writing an autobiography. Oh Vanna!

Vanna White, game-show hostess extraordinaire — what is it about her that makes most (if not all) red-blooded American males want to give their right arms to see her turn letters in person? And what makes all of America want to follow suit and go crazy for her? She made the cover of Newsweek, and, at last report, she has had five babies and three cats named after her.

She and her host-sidekick Pat Sajak smiled their way across North Carolina last Friday on an Amtrak whistle-stop tour promoting the show, which stopped at Fayetteville, Selma, Wilson and Rocky Mount.

The Wilson train station was mobbed with eager "Wheel of Fortune" lovers: housewives, kids playing hookey and businessmen on their lunch hours.

The crowd of about 500 gathered at the Wilson station wouldn't leave their spots even though the train was over an hour late and a major house fire broke out a block away. The mayor of Wilson was on hand with a letter opener and a key to the city for Vanna — and for Pat too. The mayor said he watched "Wheel."

"Isn't that the show where they turn those numbers around?" he asked a reporter. A woman in the crowd added, "My daughter Missy about cried when she found out that Vanna was coming during school. We watch 'Wheel of Fortune' every night."

Aha. Perhaps that's part of the secret of Vanna's amazing success — nighttime "Wheel." When the show hit evening markets in syndication, it caught on and began beating out everything it was put up against, including the network news. The show has an unbelievable 43 million viewers and grosses \$120 million annually while costing only \$7 million to produce.

What the crowds waiting for the train saw was a smiling bleach-blond goddess in a snug kelly green sweater dress accented by a white belt studded with faux diamonds and white spike-heeled boots. Boy, was she ever toned. Rumor had it that she was 5-6 and weighed 107 lbs. But she's human. She has crow's feet, and no, they don't look nearly as big in person as they do in those low-cut dresses she wears on TV.

"I can give you Pat, but I can't give you Vanna," an NBC official said during the Amtrak press conference. Sajak, Vanna's 40-year-old sidekick (she's 29) is cute in a weird, elfish sort of way. But compared to Vanna, he looked bland, wearing



DTH/Julie Stovall

Pat and Vanna talking to reporters during their whistlestop tour of North Carolina last Friday

brown pants, a burgundy sweater and a brown sportcoat (bland). Yes, his hair is receding, but he has deep dimples and a good sense of humor.

Sajak is realistic about "Wheel's" success. "Like any show, 'Wheel' will have its lifetime," he said. Does he really have as much fun on stage as he seems to on TV? "Why sure. We're not doing 'Hallmark Hall of Fame.' It's a game show, and by its very nature is supposed to be fun."

But the crowd wanted Vanna; they wanted to see her wave and smile and turn. Oh, and talk. She formed sentences.

Did she ever expect it when first picked by Merv Griffin out of a group of 200 girls? "Never," she told a group of local reporters. When asked about her own success and the reasons behind it, she expressed disbelief, saying she was just Vanna and nothing else. "What you see is what you get."

But surprisingly, under all of that glitz, she was really classy. When asked to autograph a picture from her unauthorized Playboy magazine lingerie layout of past years, she refused, saying: "I don't deal with Playboy. Those pictures were taken when I couldn't eat and I was trying

to pay the rent. I hope you understand." And her smile faded for a moment.

Actually, Vanna is a literary type. With the help of a ghost writer, she's writing an autobiography called

souri. Perhaps this is the reason behind her perfect record in her four years on "Wheel." In all that time, she has never turned a wrong letter. Never mind that they light up to aid her; it's work.

Vanna's proper title is "letter turner," and she claims that she doesn't want a bigger role on the show, content to leave most of the talking to Sajak while she turns letters and models fur coats and cheers on discouraged contestants with her hearty clapping and smiling.

"Vanna Speaks." It is slated to hit bookstores in May.

What will it contain? "Oh, anything and everything you've ever wanted to know about Vanna White," she said. And the American public obviously wants to know all about Vanna; Warner Books, the publisher, has sold 35 thousand copies in advance.

Vanna also has a degree in journalism from the University of Mis-

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What has already been revealed about Vanna's personal life is that she's single, lives with her two cats in Hollywood Hills and that her tastes include the color pink, glazed donuts and occasional visits back home to her family in Myrtle Beach, S.C.

She says she'd like to be married someday, and she hasn't been suffering from a lack of proposals. A man at the Rocky Mount train station tried to give her a dozen roses, but security wouldn't let the flowers through. The man walked off muttering that he guessed he would have to give them to his girlfriend instead.

Sure, Vanna's like a living Barbie in sequins and spiked heels (though Sajak may hardly be Ken), but that's the true essence of Vanna — what you see is what you get, as she says. And what you get is lots of smiles and enthusiasm and niceness.

But as the train pulled away from the station in Rocky Mount, North Carolinians caught their last glimpse of Vanna in person and reserved themselves to the reality that she would once again become a porcelain TV figure.

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