

newsworthy trends

Miss Iowa Changing Attitudes About Disabilities

(NAPS)—Born without her left hand, 24-year-old Theresa Uchytel—Miss Iowa 2000-2001 and a former patient of Twin Cities Shriners Hospitals for Children in Minneapolis—doesn't see herself as disabled. Wanting to change attitudes, she is the first woman with a visible disability to compete for the crown of Miss America.

"It's very important to me to know that my life is making an impact on others," she explained.

Raised in Urbandale, Iowa, as the middle of five daughters born to Liz and Vern Uchytel, she became a patient at Twin Cities Shriners Hospital at age 2. Visiting the hospital every six months for checkups, she first received a prosthetic hook-style hand, which helped her develop the muscles on the left side of her body, and later received myoelectric and cosmetic hands. For her, using a prosthesis is no different than wearing contact lenses or having braces.

During the Miss America welcoming ceremony in Atlantic City, NJ, when she stepped up to the microphone to give her introductory statement, Theresa told her fellow contestants to keep an eye out for her prosthesis. "If you see one lying around, it's probably mine," she said.

While participating in the preliminaries for the nationally televised Miss America competition, she did not wear her prosthesis during her swimsuit or evening gown presentations—only during her interview with a panel of judges. A former national baton-twirling champion who led the band at Iowa State for five years,



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Miss Iowa Theresa Uchytel was the first Miss America contestant with a visible disability.

Theresa also left the cosmetic hand backstage during her fast-paced talent routine.

Since early in her life, she simply learned to do things differently. At the age of 6, a friend asked her to take baton lessons, which evolved into private lessons because of her budding abilities; she learned to toss a baton with her right hand and catch it with her left arm.

"I owe a lot of my success to the fact that my parents always supported me," Theresa said. "We had a rule in our house—once you start something, you just don't quit. No exceptions. When I wanted to be a baton twirler, nobody asked me if I could do it; my only concern was, could I be the best?"

Theresa remembers a day on the grade school playground when her prosthesis came off and some of the kids laughed and yelled, "Captain Hook!" She got back on the monkey bars and went across it using her right hand and left arm. "The kids stopped laughing, she said. She went on to participate in volleyball, basketball, track and student government throughout school.

Graduating from the Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication at Iowa State in 1998, she received a speech communications degree. Today, she is a program manager for higher education at Gateway Computers, taking a one-year leave of absence to fulfill her duties as Miss Iowa. With scholarship money received from participating in the Miss America Pageant, she plans to continue her education by obtaining an MBA degree with an emphasis in marketing.

For more information on Shriners' network of 22 hospitals that provide free treatment to children with orthopaedic problems, burns and spinal cord injuries, write to: Shriners International Headquarters, Public Relations Dept., 2900 Rocky Point Dr., Tampa, FL 33607, or visit the Web site at www.shrinershq.org.

If you know a child Shriners can help, call 1-800-237-5055 in the United States or 1-800-361-7256 in Canada. Shriners Hospitals provide free treatment to children under age 18 without regard to race, religion or relationship to a Shriner.