



PHOTOS SUBMITTED

KENTUCKY'S MISS AMERICA

Bowling Green senior Ann-Blair Thornton told a preschooler she loved her pink, sparkled rhinestone shoes. The girl ran after Thornton as she was leaving, shouting 'Miss Kentucky I have to give you something.'

She ripped a hot-pink rhinestone off her shoe and said 'I saw your crown was missing a rhinestone.' Placing it in the missing spot it fit perfectly on the Cheeto stained crown.

"Everyone else is so obsessed with keeping their crown clean, but it hasn't been loved then. You gotta get some stains on it or something," said Thornton, Miss Kentucky 2011. "I just can't bring myself to wipe it off. I love Cheetos and I love kids."

With her Lexington apartment waiting one week after winning the state competition Thornton paused her life as a Western Kentucky University Hilltopper in July 2011.

She sacrificed recruitment week with her sorority the Chi Theta chapter of Chi Omega and starting her senior year in the fall.

"It was hard because I was recruitment chair last year, so that's a big deal to me. I lost contact really quickly with my friends whom I slept with the same roof," Thornton said looking down.

Listed in her black-and-white polka dotted cased iPhone was a schedule full of state school appearances as Miss Kentucky.

However, Thornton sent a surprise video message to her Chi O sisters during recruitment week, according to Bardstown senior and Chi O member, Laura Beth Blanford.

"Since winning [Miss Kentucky] she hasn't changed, she is still the same ol' Ann-Blair, just a little bit busier," said Blanford. "It was really special that she took the time to not only send us a message, but show potential new members how much Chi Omega meant to her."

Thornton's mother Terri, nicknamed "Pag" within the family as a joke, because she was opposite of a "pageant mom," remembered the day when Thornton's pageant dreams were known as a four-year-old.

"She said 'Mama, I'm going to be Miss America

some day,' and I turned around and said 'oh, really?' and I didn't think she was that serious and went on about my business. She was always saying she was going to be Miss America, so finally I thought she's for real and Miss America's got to have a talent."

The talent her mother was referring to was classical piano.

Before she boarded the plane in January 2012, Thornton and her mother cried in the car and then stared at each other.

"It was a joyful cry. I was nervous and she was nervous, I was excited and I cried and I didn't want her to cry. I told her to be strong. It was very emotional. We looked at each other knowing it was the end of this incredible journey," said her mother.

And with that Thornton was on her way to Las Vegas to compete in Miss America against 52 other women. She rehearsed, filmed commercials and was interviewed throughout two weeks of preparation.

She laughed as she described her experience in Miss America as surreal and a "third-grade field trip" with breaks in between for naptime.

"We were running on three hours of sleep just about everyday," said Thornton a week after Miss America with only four hours of sleep.

It was funny because we were so exhausted, 53 wonderful women sprawled on top of each other like Another One Bites the Dust--one after another-- sleep on stage until production makes us get up in our heels again and go dance to some stupid song. It was all centered on Miss America. We didn't go to shows, we couldn't even go to the bathroom by ourselves, we had to bring a buddy and a security guard."

As Thornton stood on stage in the theater of Planet Hollywood Resort & Casino in her black beaded laced silk gown, her eyes watered. She quickly dabbed her eyes before it ruined her mascara. Miss America 2000, Heather French Henry watched her from the front row and mouthed the words "I love you."

When Miss Kentucky 1999, Heather French Henry--then Heather Renee French--won Miss America 2000, Thornton said she screamed and cried as if she had won too.

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On the same night as her crowning, Thornton's father, Steve, pulled some arrangements for his daughter to meet Henry. One of his best friends and WKU Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity brother, former Lieutenant Governor Stephen L. Henry, had started dating Miss Kentucky 1999.

"I knew that Ann-Blair always had this goal to go to Miss America, to be Miss America. And as it got closer and closer, as [French] was working her way through top 10, the top five, and when she won, it was just really magical for the people in Kentucky, but especially for Ann-Blair. She knew at some point she would get to meet her," said Steve.

Along with her sister, Thornton met Henry during Christmas 2000 at the Lieutenant Governor's mansion.

"You can't pay for relationships like that for your children...it's been a blessing to Ann-Blair," said Steve.

The relationship between the two grew as Henry submitted Thornton's name in "Miss Kentucky Outstanding Teen" in 2007. Thornton said without Henry she would have never taken the initiative to enter by herself.

"I wanted her to know the inside job. She helped out with my children and went with me as I did public appearances," Henry said. Henry considered Thornton her own child, and said she was privileged to watch her grow and help her through her journey.

"She handles her nervousness in a much better way than I do, I'm almost to the point I get ill before I go on stage. I don't want to say she's a mini-me, but there is not a lot of great differences."

The first pageant gown of Thornton's was Henry's from when she crowned her successor in Miss America. Her evening gown in Miss America 2012 was designed by the Heather French Henry collection of Louisville.

"Everyone somehow has a connection to my parents or my family, even people I have never even met flew out to Vegas because they were proud of their 'Bowling Green girl,'" said Thornton.

Although Miss Kentucky 2011 did not advance to the semi-finals, Thornton was awarded Miss America's Quality of Life Award and a \$6,000 scholarship in recognition of her platform for Alzheimer's awareness

and research.

According to Henry, three former Miss Americas chose the three recipients of the award.

"For those of us in the organization, it ranks right up there with the title of Miss America," said Henry. However, Henry said she had hurt for Thornton when her name wasn't called in the final 15. "I was devastated, but I told Ann-Blair going into it, you have 53 awesome young women who are all beautiful and all talented. To me she is still Kentucky's Miss America."

Thornton was speechless about her experiences with the other contestants. She called them on the road, to and from her visits to Kentucky schools for appearances. To Thornton, the Miss America organization was another sisterhood.

"It's not about the competition. We realize it's a pageant. The friendships and relationships you'll build is more important than anything else," said Thornton. "It's so cool to think I have a friend in every other state plus the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico."

Finishing her title as Miss Kentucky in July 2012 Thornton planned to continue work for her platform and teach others what her grandfather, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 2006 and died in 2009, instilled in her: hard work, patience and love.

"If you're going to do well in the Miss America organization you have to understand the crown is not about you. It's not about the vanity, the fleeting fame, or the trip to Vegas... or the hairspray. It's about how the crown can affect other people and impact other's lives, as cheesy as that sounds," she said.

During three years of national competitions in the Miss America program, Thornton had won more than \$40,000 in scholarships. She planned to attend law school and continue to make an impact in Kentucky after her reign.

"The work I have done as Miss Kentucky, I just don't want it to end. So looking forward past Miss America, I want to make that impact," said Thornton. "I'm still trying to think in some way I can still be making a tangible difference where you can see it, you can feel it, you can taste it. After tasting it just a little bit, I just can't let it go."

NATASHA A. SIMMONS



ABOVE | Miss Kentucky 2011 Ann-Blair Thornton, a Bowling Green Senior, visits St. Joseph Catholic School in Bowling Green where she attended elementary and junior high school. After having just competed in the 2012 Miss America pageant the week before many of the children were excited to see her after watching her on TV.

LEFT | As part of her Miss Kentucky responsibilities, Thornton visits elementary schools all across the state to speak about her success. She told the children three steps that helped her achieve her goals: patience, hard work and love. Her story came to life as she gave personal anecdotes about her struggles to finally win Miss Kentucky after three attempts and through what her grandfather taught her.

BRITTANY SOWACKE