

There she is...

Written by CAROL POMEDAY
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“There she is — Miss America. There she is, your ideal.”

That was sung Saturday night for Miss Wisconsin, Laura Kaeppler of Kenosha, who was crowned Miss America. The last Miss Wisconsin to win the title was Terry Ann Meeuwsen in 1973.

Grafton teenager Marlaina Perelshtein, who friends call Marly, hopes someday the refrain is sung for her.



With one beauty title already won, Grafton’s Marlaina Perelshtein aspires to be Miss America and then, with the title’s scholarship, a medical student. Photo by Sam Arendt.

Marlaina, 14, has taken a step in that direction by being crowned Miss Milwaukee Outstanding Teen on Saturday, Jan. 7, in Milwaukee.

The poised young woman, who is a freshman at Grafton High School and a member of the varsity dance team, said her goal is to be Miss America and win the \$50,000 scholarship so she can become a pediatric anesthesiologist.

For her talent in the teen pageant, Marlaina, who plays guitar, violin and piano, sang “Music of the Night” from “Phantom of the Opera.”

She came on stage with a long black cloak lined in red and a white mask over half her face. Both were flung off as she sang the piece in a flowing, red gown.

In June, Marlaina will vie for Miss Wisconsin Teen, which is held in conjunction with the Miss Wisconsin pageant in Oshkosh.

Her teen crown, Marlaina said, allows her to promote her platform to stop bullying in schools through peer pressure and peer mediation.

Marlaina started a peer mediation program, B2, at her former school, Maple Dale Middle School in Fox Point.

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Teachers were asked to select a boy and girl from each grade for the mediation team. Marlaina then wrote letters to their parents requesting permission for them to be on the team.

“We didn’t have to mediate many times because bullying became unacceptable,” Marlaina said.

“Some kids are afraid to go to their teachers and think nothing will be done. They felt more comfortable coming to us. We used to have a lot of bullying. We have many ethnic groups and religions. I think now they know it’s not OK to bully.”

When she was in fourth grade, Marlaina stood up for a girl from Russia who was being teased by a group of students.

“She had just come to our school and a lot of kids were making fun of her accent and how she looked and dressed,” Marlaina said. “When I saw it happening that day, I made them apologize.

“That’s what I’m trying to tell kids. If you can be that one person to speak out, others will follow you and find their voice.”

Although there is less diversity at her new high school, Marlaina said, there is a lot of bullying and school officials have expressed interest in her program.

The Perelshteins have lived in Grafton for 10 years.

Marlaina can’t vie for Miss Wisconsin until she’s 17, but her parents Mark and Lisa believe she will stay focused on her quest. Her 8-year-old brother Alex enjoys the pageants and was an escort once.

Marlaina said she’s watched the Miss America pageant every year (except last Saturday because she was in a dance competition) and dreamed about wearing the crown.

“All girls dream about that,” she said. “I thought it was all glitz and glamour, tots and tiaras.”

Mrs. Perelshtein felt the same way and had no intention of entering her daughter in beauty pageants until a friend told her about his daughter’s experiences with the Miss Milwaukee Teen and National American Miss pageants.

“He said they’re based on academics, community service, talent, interviews and public speaking,” Mrs. Perelshtein said.

When they learned about the scholarships available, Marlaina said she wanted to try it.

Without much preparation, Marlaina entered the National American Miss Preteen when she was 12 and won the Cover Girl and talent categories. The next year, she came in seventh out of

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103 contestants.

But it was the Miss Milwaukee Teen title that she wanted. In her first attempt last year, she didn't place and ended up in tears.

"She was really upset and disappointed," Mrs. Perelshtein said. "She came down for breakfast the next morning, and I thought, 'What is she going to be like?' She looked at me and said, 'What do we have to do to win next year?'"

The changes she made paid off.

Marlaina takes voice lessons in Bayside and Grafton. Her gowns come from a shop run by her voice teacher.

She also receives help from pageant organizers. The teen pageants include interviews, public speaking, modeling in gowns and shorts and talent.

"The pageants really sharpened my skills, such as interviewing and public speaking," Marlaina said. "I have a lot more confidence speaking in front of people."

The 2012 Miss Milwaukee pageant winners — Marlaina, Miss Milwaukee and Miss Milwaukee Junior — will appear at various functions and support each other.

Marlaina will attend numerous events for Children's Miracle Network, a charity supported by the Miss America organization, March of Dimes and Children's Hospital of Wisconsin. She recently was at a blood drive and met a spunky little boy with cancer who captured her heart.

Marlaina wants to be a pre-med student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, then focus on her specialty at Johns Hopkins University Medical Center in Baltimore.

She enjoys writing, vocal and instrumental music and is starting to write songs.

Marlaina also enjoys the glamour surrounding the pageants.

"It's not every day you can put on a gown and feel like a princess," she said.