

# 'Not a deaf person who's a contestant, a contestant who happens to be deaf'

## Miss Tulare County adds grit to the state pageant's pathway

By MARYBETH VARCADOS  
Living Section Editor

IN SEPTEMBER, a pageant for the deaf will take place. Attractive young women — all with hearing impairments — will compete for a title and attending prizes.

But Dierdra Hamilton, who has a 97 percent hearing loss, won't be among the contenders. Instead, she's chosen the toughest competition of all — the quest this week for the Miss California crown.

Where others at the Civic Auditorium bubble and chatter through their paces at ease, Dierdra appears more reserved, watching everyone and everything intently, lip-reading.

She says she doesn't consider her hearing impairment any more a handicap than the various blocks to perfection we carry in our life's baggage, in one form or another.

So, this contestant, 21, Miss Tulare County and a graduate of Pepperdine College, is "not a deaf person who's a contestant" for the Miss California title, but "a contestant who also happens to be deaf." As far as anyone seems to know, that makes her a "first."

Dierdra talks in studied tones that she can't hear, but feels "here," she presses her rib cage, "...no, more here," she pats her chest.

She evokes admiration from hearing persons — for herself, and for her family in Visalia.

When the spotlight catches her during the talent portion of the pageant, she'll reach for her keenest sense of timing. In order to carry off the signing of her dramatic piece she must catch her cue — a loud drum beat in the musical prelude — exactly on time.

"When I was 2, my parents were told I wouldn't graduate from high school," says the petite honey-blonde. She watches your lips as you express amazement, then asks, "Who's to say what our limitations, or our capabilities, are?"

Lip reading as quickly as others hear words spoken — even catching

conversations from the side — she's a polished interview subject, and has appeared several times on television.

"I always played with younger children, and not until I was 10 did I say a full sentence," she says.

"I went to public school, and my parents went three times a week, to communicate with the teachers. So my special education was at home. I was very lucky." She thinks back to very early years when money was scarce, and her parents, who married young, mixed work and schooling, and still found time to devote to talking to and encouraging her.

---

**'Once I entered the Miss California pageant, I realized I am just as capable as anyone else — I wouldn't have gone for the pageant for the deaf, even if I had heard about it earlier.'**

---

— Dierdra Hamilton

Now, her father is in insurance and investments and her mother is a nurse. She has one sibling, a younger sister.

By high school, she was ready for sign language, and substituted signing for the foreign language requirement.

"School was where I grew up," she recalls.

At College of the Sequoias, interest in journalism led her to editing posts in news and features, but that's a field where hearing becomes crucial and so was ruled out. She entered Pepperdine on scholarships, majored in psychology and has set her goals high — on doctoral work,

with intentions to counsel parents of handicapped children and to teach at the college level.

Dierdra spent six months in Heidelberg, Germany, on Pepperdine's Year in Europe program. That meant studies for four days a week, and travel — eventually through nine countries — the other three days. German was required; she passed. And, she discovered, she can lip-read in other languages. "English is hard — they don't say their 'r's'," she grins.

Of the alphabet's 26 letters, just seven are "readable," which makes for a lot of "educated guessing," she adds.

What would be her counsel to families of the handicapped?

"First, that parents' acceptance is major. They tend to blame themselves. They feel so helpless.

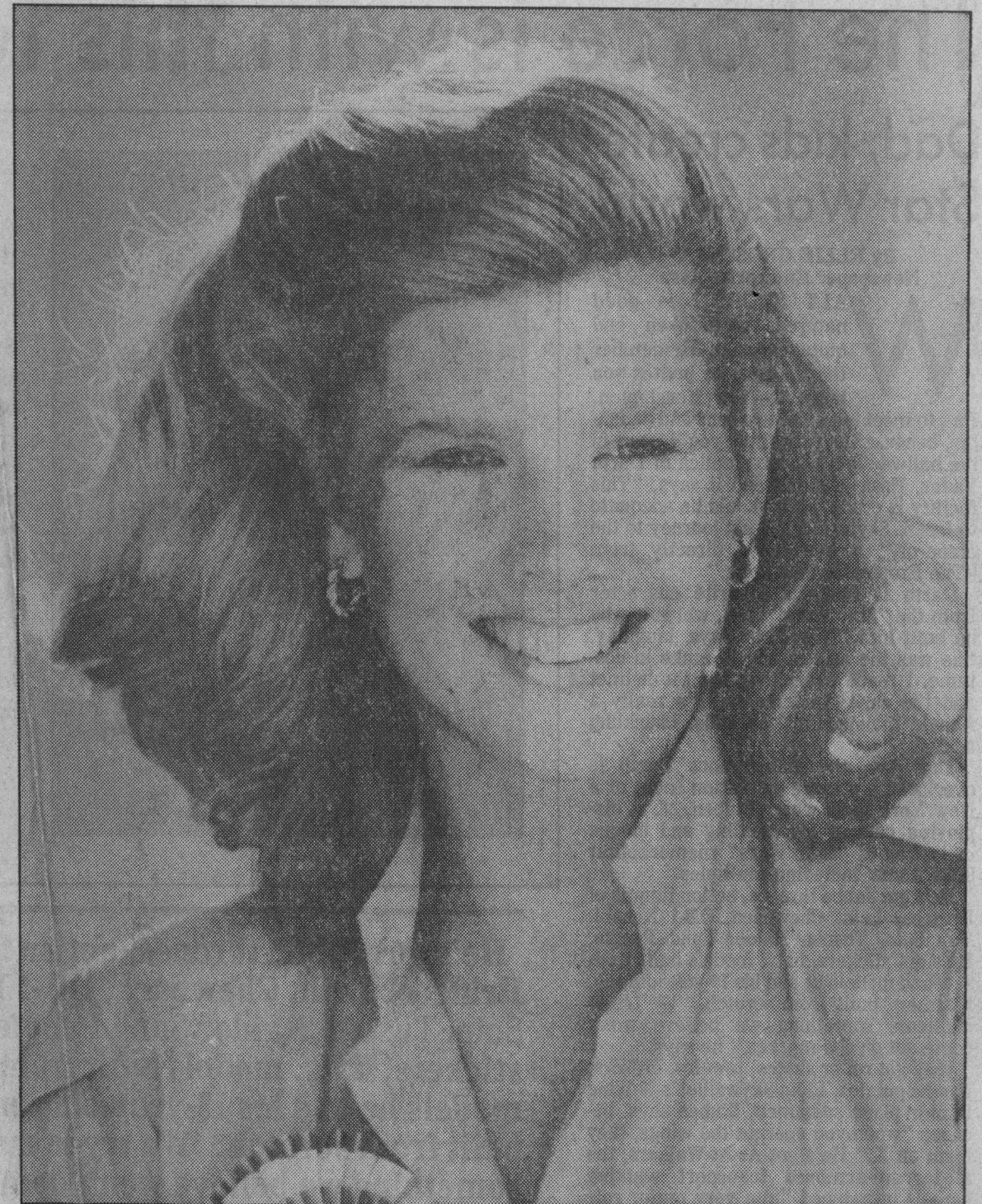
"Second, to realize that when there's a handicapped child in a family, certain adaptations are crucial. My parents spent more time and energy on me than anyone else I know. I feel very lucky."

How others treat a deaf person wasn't always Dierdra's concern, "but it has become one." Her chaperone, Nancy Bradstreet, reminds people gently, "She can do it. She doesn't need to be hovered over."

Dierdra ran for Miss Tulare County twice before winning, was spurred on by the Kiwanis Club. "I realized I had a whole new set of goals, and that I needed to grow, to become more well-rounded. And I worked on my speech. I have a very soft voice. I had to learn to make it louder — or softer, when I got too loud."

She's after scholarships. "Once I entered the Miss California pageant, I realized I am just as capable as anyone else — I wouldn't have gone for the pageant for the deaf, even if I had heard about it earlier. I wanted these scholarship opportunities ... and this is a respected program."

Of the other hopefuls, she observes, "We all have the same hopes, the same dreams."



Dierdra Hamilton: 'The same hopes, the same dreams.'

Dan Coyro/Sentinel