

From [UrbanTulsa.com](http://UrbanTulsa.com)

Originally published by *Urban Tulsa Weekly* Thursday, June 12, 2003

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## Here She Comes . . .

**. . . There she goes. Beauty pageants answer that inevitable question: "Mommy, Where do tv news anchors come from?"**

by Barry Friedman

Two hours after *Miss Oklahoma* was named, a girl wearing a crown sat at IHOP, eating breakfast.

It was *Miss Teen Oklahoma*.

In a ceremony that rivals only the local Tulsa ADDY awards in length—more than three hours—the *Miss Oklahoma Pageant*, held once again at the ORU Mabee Center, named its new queen Saturday night.

Perhaps surprisingly, perhaps not to those who follow the pageant circuit, the winner had competed before for the title—five times to be exact—as had the runner-up, who had also finished second in 2002.

This year's pageant, which could have been used by a previous Miss Oklahoma as an audition tape for *American Idol*, had as its theme the need to keep the music alive in all of us. As such, a montage of songs, celebrating its power, including the '70s Doobie Brothers' forgettable *Listen to the Music*, was played throughout, including dance mixes of 15-year old hits.

The evening began when a man with dyed blonde hair and a fake tan took the stage and promised a show featuring "the best bunch in eight years." He soon left, but not before wiggling his butt at the crowd. He, as it turned out, was the choreographer. The *bunch* consisted of 44 four girls (or *ladies* as organizers liked to call them), including ones with the cinematic and geographically ambivalent titles of *Miss Queen of the West*, *Miss Northwest Passage*, *Miss Greater Oklahoma*, and *Miss Skiatook Area*.

It was the *Miss Oklahoma 2003 Pageant*, but the show really belonged to the ubiquitous *Miss Oklahoma 2002*, Casey Preslar. During the evening, she returned to the stage eight separate times to sing and talk, including, a moment toward the end, where she sat on stage on a red chair watching herself on a monitor talking about what it was like being Casey Presale

Ms. Preslar appeared to enjoy being *Miss Oklahoma* so much, she would, like Bill Clinton, no doubt run again if she could. And, judging from the crowd's reaction, she would win, too.

The crowd was a cross between one found at a political convention and one found at dollar *Coors* night at Cloud Nine. Across the Mabee Center, people waved photos of girls in *Glamour Shot* poses while others whistled and shouted *Go, Kelly!* like they were watching a dancer slide down a pole with a dollar in her cleavage.

There were nervous parents, overbearing boyfriends, and loud and obnoxious supporters. Before the show started, a woman in a rhinestone *Altus* broach spoke with a woman wearing a Joy-Marie Clare *Miss Tulsa* pin, while a photographer from an Okmulgee paper, in view of the bald men in tuxedos with name tags and walkie-talkies, tried to maneuver herself closer to the runway.

There were former Miss Oklahomas, pre-pubescent girls in white who hoped to be future Miss Oklahomas, and local celebrities and sponsors sheepishly taking bows after having their names announced.

For all the organizers talk of being a *scholarship* and not a beauty event, *Miss Oklahoma* has an official pageant chiropractor and dentist on hand, along with specialists in hair, make-up, nails, and wardrobe. A finalist will still talk of using her title to better the world 10 minutes after prancing around the stage wearing an ensemble of a black leather jacket, bikini, and high heels. (One of the girls, *Miss Greater Oklahoma*, Jennifer Berry, spoke in her interview of her first swimsuit event in a bathing suit, which, "I had worn all summer, so it still had, you know, those little bumps down there in the back from sitting on concrete all summer.")

Beauty pageants may be anachronistic and self-conscious, but they're not apologetic. Names of advertisers, obviously proud to be affiliated with *Miss Oklahoma*, filled overhead screens before the show and during intermission. During breaks, pageant host, Amy Duncan Basham, *Miss Oklahoma* 1996, thanked local clothing companies, the

Kiwanis Club of Tulsa (even announcing its meeting dates and times), technical support people, pageant officers, and even herself at one point for keeping the true spirit of the competition alive.

Some of the local pageants across the state are open to any girl from Oklahoma, which may explain a pageant with the title *Miss Southern Delaware County*; others, like the *Miss Broken Arrow* Pageant, which was voted best pageant in the state, are closed, meaning the girls who enter must be residents or students. But it doesn't mean that girl who loses in Broken Arrow can't compete in *Miss Coweta Area* if she so chooses.

## Nail-biting Time

After some spirited dance production numbers, the field was reduced to the Top 11, after judges discovered that the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> spots ended in a tie and chose to include both.

As the rest of the field looked on with frozen smiles, the curtain was unceremoniously dropped between them and the finalists. Judges were then introduced, including the husband of Shawntel Smith, a former *Miss Oklahoma and Miss America*. Soon thereafter, Ms. Preslar, wearing what appeared to be *Jordache* jeans, came out and danced with one of the judges, a soap opera star, who removed his jacket for the "impromptu" moment.

Each of the eleven finalists then performed her talent portion of the evening. Seven sang, including one who performed something the pageant program advertised as "*Bride over Troubled Water*," three danced, and one played the oboe. From the audience's reaction, the clear winner was Dionne White, *Miss Okmulgee*, who did a stirring rendition of Anita Baker's "If I Could."

Ms. White seemed the overwhelming crowd favorite at this point to win the title, though *Miss Oklahoma State Fair*, Kelley Scott, had a more organized contingent—especially since all the Tulsa area entrants, *Miss Tulsa*, *Miss Tulsa State Fair*, *Miss Broken Arrow*, and *Miss Owasso* failed to make it into the Round of 11.

The Five Finalists were announced after the intermission: *Miss Skiatook Lake*, Amanda Lee; *Miss Oklahoma State Fair*, Kelley Scott; *Miss Greater Oklahoma*, Jennifer Berry (despite her fall during her ballet number); *Miss Lake Hudson*, Brooke Haley; and *Miss Okmulgee*, Dionne White.

The only surprised seemed to be that nobody in the crowd seemed surprised by the five.

KTUL's Cindy Morrison, herself a *Miss Oklahoma* pageant contestant (she finished third), was brought out to ask the girls their final interview questions. In a point system only somewhat less complicated than the NFL tie-breaker for post-season play, this part of the pageant would prove decisive.

Morrison first asked how the girls felt at being one of the five finalists; the girls' answers were predictably gracious. She then asked the girls, as a group, questions about President Bush's promise to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, how to get more women involved in the political process and how, really, could a Miss Oklahoma's one-year reign make a difference in people's lives.

### Some Surprises

To this final question, the girls' answers varied from advocating education, improving awareness, and hoping men and women will just "step out." Morrison then asked each girl a question posed by a girl not in the finals. In this exchange, Jennifer Berry, *Miss Greater Oklahoma*, made the rather startling admission that if she couldn't win, she thought Kelley Scott, *Miss Oklahoma State Fair*, should.

The point of this question and answer section was ultimately to see how the girls could articulate their *core issue*, the platform they would advocate promote if selected. This would be critical, an organizer mentioned later, for once the competition is over, *Miss Oklahoma* essentially becomes a spokesperson with a crown. The five finalists' core issues included ADHD, overweight children, drinking and driving, fire safety, and open adoption.

Morrison didn't press the girls for specific information; the girls didn't offer much amplification.

Before the winner was announced, Ms. Basham reminded us again that *Miss Oklahoma* was a job, not just a title, pointing to a story in which she, herself, visited an Indian reservation and discovered first hand how the less fortunate lived and how, more importantly, anyone who thought they were better than anyone else needed a "reality check."

The ROTC then marched onto the stage; Ms. Preslar once again came out, talked about the music within her, thanked her Lord and Savior, and then helped lead the crowd in *God Bless America*.

Ms. Basham explained the scholarship money awarded to each girl, and announced the final vote:

Amanda Lee, *Miss Skiatook Lake*—4<sup>th</sup> Runner-Up

Jennifer Berry, *Miss Greater Oklahoma*—3<sup>rd</sup> Runner Up

Brooke Haley, *Miss Lake Hudson*—2<sup>nd</sup> Runner Up

Dionne White, *Miss Okmulgee*—1<sup>st</sup> Runner Up

Kelley Scott, *Miss Oklahoma State Fair*. Miss Oklahoma 2003.

Just Too Happy

When Ms. Scott's name was announced, she went into what appeared to be an epileptic-like seizure at her victory. Her supporters stood and cheered; other contestants, too, joined in the celebration, including a gracious Dionne White, *Miss Okmulgee*, who finished second for the second year in a row.

Off the record, a pageant organizer told me later that Ms. White blew it on her answer to her core question, which concerned teen pregnancy. She, and who knows if this is the reason for her loss, appeared to endorse sex education as a means to curb unwanted pregnancy. This same organizer told me that Ms. White, who lost last year--the organizer intimated, because of a weight problem--had lost this year due to an overconfident attitude that she was entitled to the crown.

"There's always next year," the organizer said, "providing she doesn't *age out*," the term used to describe women who grow too old to compete for *Miss Oklahoma*.

Regardless of who *ages out* next year, there will always be a girl who wants to be a beauty queen. She'll no doubt be in her living room, wearing her mother's high heels

and a homemade crown, practicing perfect posture and the all important wave—or maybe she's already at IHOP.