HERE SHE IS

Former Miss America Nicole Johnson champion for diabetes awareness

BY CURT HILLS
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THE VILLAGES — the doctor told 19-year-old Nicole Johnson she had Type I diabetes. The bad news didn’t stop there.

Johnson said she was told more than once by others that her diabetes diagnosis meant that there were certain things she couldn’t do in her life. If she had listened to them, she said, her future would have looked bleak.

But Johnson wasn’t listening. Or if she was, she was determined to prove them wrong.

She took a giant step to quash the naysayers one night in September 1998 on national TV on the Miss America pageant stage.

With the announcement that the other finalist would be the first runner-up, Johnson couldn’t contain her excitement, pumping her fists and hopping with joy before sharing a hug with the other contestant.

The words “Miss Virginia, Nicole Johnson is Miss America 1999,” came at that moment.

As she made the walk, all the while waving, down the runway, Johnson became the first contestant with a chronic disease to win the Miss America crown.

“You don’t have to be perfect to accomplish incredible things with your life,” she said.

Unfazed by doubters, Johnson went on to become an award-winning TV journalist, author of six books, including ones dealing with her life with diabetes and a cookbook for diabetic patients, as well as taking her Miss America platform and turning it into an effort to become a consultant and advocate for diabetes issues during several years on a global stage.

Top: Miss America 1999
Nicole Johnson speaks about diabetes
May 17 during a visit to The Villages, Johnson, who has Type I diabetes, draws on her considerable accomplishments to help raise awareness about the disease. Above: Jim Smith; Nancy Smith; Richard Mabey; his sister, Patty Mabey; and Vivian Murray speak with Johnson about diabetes.

See JOHNSON, A5 Photos by Bill Mitchell / Daily Sun
Johnson said if individuals with diabetes do not control their blood sugar levels they put themselves at serious risk. Illness, amputation, kidney disease, heart disease and a whole host of other problems could occur, Johnson said. That’s one of the reasons Johnson and USF Health officials are so eager to spend time in The Villages. Johnson has already briefed a few members of the Diabetes Support Group and intends to speak to residents at a later date. It’s her hope to pass on new information and reminders about keeping diabetes in check.

Checking blood sugars and having a simple exercise program can do wonders, she said. “Loose a modest amount of weight, like 18 pounds, and walk 30 minutes a day, five days per week,” Johnson said. “Walking 30 minutes a day can help you halt the complications of diabetes.”

She said “90 percent is the strategy” in dealing with disease, including recognizing one’s strengths and weaknesses.

“My weakness is that bakery aisle at the grocery store. I don’t want to walk down that aisle,” she said. “Don’t go in there, make someone else do it.”

**Dispelling misconceptions**

Ever since being diagnosed with diabetes, Johnson said she’s made it a goal to dispel myths and create a better understanding of the disease and those who suffer from it.

“People typically have a lot of misconceptions about people with diabetes,” she said. “The important thing is how we label people. They’re a person first, their diabetes condition comes second.”

After winning the Miss America title, Johnson found herself on the covers of Newsweek and Time as the voice for the diabetes community. She wants that to continue with her role in The Villages-USF Health partnership.

“We’re going to be able to create and work together with the community to help people live better lives,” she said.

Curt Hills is an assistant managing editor with the Daily Sun. He can be reached at 753-1119, ext. 93119, or curt.hills@thevillagemedia.com.