CROWNING ACHIEVEMENT
MISS AMERICA 1999 GIVES TIPS ON LIVING WELL WITH ILLNESS

By CURT HILLS
DAILY SUN

THE VILLAGES —
his Miss America who
knew was hung on her.
But that was nothing compared to what
ignorance had thrown her way a couple of
years earlier. She’d definitely heard worse.

And it wasn’t second-
hand chatter or heard whispers. Instead, it came in
the form of verbal daggers
right in her face. Her own
ears heard crushing news
after crushing news.
It started in 1997, when
she fell not once, but twice,
on stage while competing
in a pageant.
“Oh, bless her heart, she
had stage fright,” they
thought, Johnson recalled.
But it was a little more
severe than simply pageant
jitters. The second collapse
left her temporarily com-
tose. When she regained
consciousness, word came at the hospital that she
had Type 1 diabetes.
The diagnosis was immediately followed by doc-
tors filled with negativity. To this day, Johnson
remembers their words.

"You need to take on any opportunity with a great, positive
attitude and remember no challenge is bigger than you are."
— Nicole Johnson Miss America 1999

NICOLE JOHNSON CONNECTS
WITH, INSPIRES VHS STUDENTS

By KATIE BACKMAN
DAILY SUN

THE VILLAGES —
Miss America 1999
Nicole Johnson had
Villages High School
ninth-graders hanging on her
every word.
Tuesday morning, before John-
son spoke at Savannah Center,
she made a stop at The Villages
High School to motivate the
ninth-grade students to respect
themselves and set high goals.
Johnson, executive director of
the Bringing-Science Home pro-
gram at the University of South
Florida, laid down three ground
rules for students to live by.
First, students must be engaged
every day; second, they need to
love and respect themselves; and
finally they must never give up.
These students are at an
important point in their lives, and
many of their decisions now will
shape their futures, she said.
"This is an exciting and won-
derful opportunity to interac-

"T"

See JOHNSON, A10

Photos by Bill Mitchell and George Horsford / Daily Sun

Above: Nicole Johnson, Miss America 1999, holds her crown as she speaks to the crowd
at Savannah Center in The Villages on Tuesday during the USF Health in The Villages
free information series. Left: Johnson has audience volunteers, center to right, Barbara and
Rudy Neustadter, residents of the Village of Amelia, and Russ D’Emidio, a resident of the
Village of Virginia Trace, prepare a healthy snack with watermelon during the event.

See STUDENTS, A11

Nicole Johnson, Miss America 1999, speaks with Dilan Liner, a
ninth-grader, following a talk with students Tuesday at The Villages
High School.
INSPIRING MOTIVATION

Nicole Johnson gives audience ‘a lot to think about’ on diabetes

By DAVID R. CORDER
DAILY SUN

THE VILLAGES – Lindsey Smith thought immediately of her granddaughter upon learning that former Miss America Nicole Johnson would speak Tuesday afternoon about diabetes as part of the USF Health in The Villages free information series at Savannah Center.

The Village of Poinciana resident suspected that granddaughter Olivia Fulton, 12, diagnosed with the most serious form of diabetes, might benefit from hearing how Johnson not only overcame adversity as a diabetic to win the major national pageant in 1999, but became the international face of diabetes advocacy, completed two master’s degrees and is working on a doctorate in pursuit of a career in public health.

“I thought Nicole would be a wonderful role model for Olivia,” Smith said after Johnson’s presentation.

Give grandmother high marks for her insight.

Upon learning about Fulton, Johnson introduced herself to the preteen, met her diabetic service dog, Gracie, and even allowed Olivia to momentarily wear the pageant winner’s prized tiara.

The presentation and interaction with Johnson left a strong positive impression on Olivia and her grandmother.

“T thought it was very good,” Olivia said of Johnson’s presentation.

In particular, Olivia remarked about how Johnson challenged conventional wisdom to create suitable recipes for diabetics and then composed a cookbook.

“With the food, that helps me a lot,” Olivia said.

Residents from throughout the community nearly filled the auditorium for this latest in a series of health information seminars as part of the innovative health partnership between the University of South Florida medical program, The Villages and the Central Florida Health Alliance.

Because of her academic affiliation, Johnson has joined this health partnership that intends to transform The Villages into “America’s Healthiest Hometown,” with well-defined, long-term goals.

The presentation Tuesday afternoon captured the attention of those in attendance, especially Curt Thomas, a Village of Tamarind Grove resident who attended the seminar with wife Peggy and good friends Joe and Susan Barta of the Village of Winifred.

Curt Thomas sat transfixed with his wife and friends, but with more than just a passing interest in diabetes prevention.

Thomas directed the elementary Christian school that Johnson attended in St. Petersburg.

Following the presentation during a book signing, Johnson saw Thomas and rushed to embrace him.

The reunion deeply touched Thomas.

“To see somebody like her overcome adversity and to encourage others, whatever health difficulties they may have, well, that is an encouragement to me,” Thomas said. “To see her become the lady she is, and to be able to project her philosophy in life and her faith is thrilling to me.”

Such a philosophy gave great hope to Joe Barta, another diabetic.

“It was a very positive and upbeat message,” Barta said of Johnson’s presentation. “I was interested as a diabetic in her experience with the insulin pump, because I think I’ll be going to that sometime in the future. And I think she gave the audience a lot to think about when it comes to blood sugar levels. She certainly gave me a lot to think about.”
“So, you were in a pageant? Well, don’t ever do that again. You can’t handle it. That’s too much stress for you. Too much stress for a person with diabetes.”

But it didn’t stop there. “They told me I wouldn’t graduate from college because I had diabetes and wouldn’t be smart enough. It was something about the blood sugars, the highs, the lows, affecting your brain,” Johnson recalled.

Her career ambitions? To become a television journalist. They tried to quash that dream, too.

“You’ll never make it in media. Journalists don’t eat lunch at the same time every day,” came the stinging words.

Then her mother was escorted out of the room so they could deliver one more bit of news. “You’ll never have children because you have diabetes and your body can’t handle it.”

Only mere hours into her newfound lifelong struggle with diabetes, and they were trying to strip her of everything.

“That’s how the first day started,” she said of her new life.

But in telling her tale Tuesday afternoon from the stage at the Scarlett O’Hara Theatre in Savannah Center, there were no tears, no tinge of sadness in her voice.

Instead, she cast smiles and an upbeat voice proclaimed, “That is the greatest opportunity of my life.”

Speaking at the latest USF Health in The Villages free information series, Johnson didn’t need to produce her Miss America 1999 tiara for the hundreds of Villages residents gathered to hear her speak to prove that she defied the odds – but she did anyway to their “oohs” and “aahs.”

Her three tips on living well despite an illness included having vision and taking action, developing strength and thinking, as well as constantly reassessing and evaluating her situation. She put those tips together to prove others wrong.

And because it happened on national television 13 years ago, the story’s ending is no secret. She made her triumphant solo trip down and back on the pageant runway as Miss America 1999.

She went on to not only earn her degree, but she holds a master’s in public health. She won journalism awards for her work in broadcast journalism.

And most importantly, she’s a proud mother, more than willing to show off photos of her family to her audience. “Living with diabetes has been the greatest blessing I have ever asked for,” she said. “Don’t get me wrong – I hate it.”

But it’s allowed her to reach out to others with diabetes – from the time that she took to the pageant platform to present day – helping others. The advice and encouragement continued Tuesday afternoon inside Savannah Center.

“She continues to walk the walk,” Villages Homeowners Association president Don Hahnfeldt said as he introduced her.

She said diabetic patients can have the good stuff, in moderation. For example, chocolate cake and a baked potato with sour cream have the same number of carbohydrates.

“You choose,” she said. “But you can’t have both.”

Johnson said besides becoming aware of what you can “negotiate” into daily eating habits, having a positive outlook and support from others will benefit diabetic patients.

As she closed her talk, she revealed she’s only worn the tiara twice – the two times it was required – the night she won and the following year when she crowned the new winner.

Johnson said otherwise the tiara wasn’t hers to wear alone, because it represented the millions with her who also had diabetes.
with the youth and young people, and I really hope they will try to apply my rules of life to their lives,” Johnson said. “I hope they walked away seeing the potential they can achieve.”

The best way to reach students is to tell personal stories about overcoming adversity, Johnson said.

Johnson was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes early in college. In Type 1 diabetes, the pancreas fails to produce insulin needed to transport blood sugar to cells, where it is later used as energy.

However, Johnson didn’t let her disease or others’ negative opinions stop her from earning the title Miss America in 1999. Johnson set a goal to win that title and she didn’t care how many people didn’t believe in her.

“When I won, all I could hear was the voices in my head telling me I couldn’t win, but … I did it,” Johnson said. “That moment proved to me that we don’t need to be perfect. We just need to have a vision, and we have to act on it.”

VHS Principal Bill Zwick said it’s important for young people to be motivated and hear from someone who has been successful. Zwick said he hopes the students will think about making good decisions and remember what Johnson said during her presentation.

Zwick encouraged the students to develop goals and follow through with them.

The presentation was very inspirational, ninth-grader Abby Follower said. Johnson did a great job talking to students and connecting with them, she added.

“I liked hearing that you don’t always have to be perfect,” Follower said. “That’s something I’ll remember.”

Near the close of her presentation, Johnson picked up a square, battered wooden box. She told the students this box is just like her and them: It’s not perfect. Inside the box is something beautiful, but it’s not perfect, either.

“You have to remember attitude and hard work really pays off,” Johnson said as she showed her Miss America crown. “You need to take on any opportunity with a great, positive attitude and remember no challenge is bigger than you are.”