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SPEAKING OUT

This Miss America tried to hide her diabetes from everyone. It nearly cost her her life

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MOST GIRLS PUT ON A FEW pounds when they go away to college. I dropped 20. It was my first semester at the University of South Florida, and I felt tired and sluggish. Some days I couldn't even get out of bed. Finally I went to campus health services. Their diagnosis: anemia. Anemia? In my senior year of high school I'd made scholarship money being in pageants, so I knew how to eat right and take care of myself. Nevertheless, I took the iron supplements they prescribed. Days went

WHAT'S COOKIN'?

"Having diabetes doesn't mean your diet has to be boring," Nicole says.



by and nothing changed. I ate everything I could get my hands on, but I still lost weight. Fast. I drank water constantly and went to the bathroom every half hour. I started throwing up and went back to health services. "You have the Beijing flu," the doctor said and gave me a prescription.

I felt better—good enough to get back to my normal life and prepare for finals. I needed money for the spring semester, so in November I entered a Miss America local pageant in Sarasota, Florida. Backstage, right before the competition began, I felt dizzy, nauseated and hot. The cold cement floor is where I found relief. My parents tried to convince me to quit. *I can't!* I thought. *I never give up! I am not going to let a virus get the best of me.*

My friend Malina, another contestant, prayed over me before we walked onstage. The announcer called the third runner-up. A bead of sweat ran down my forehead. Woozy, I tilted backward. Then the

a long pause. Mom sounded like she was having trouble getting the words out. "Sweetie, you have type one diabetes." *Diabetes? How could I have diabetes? No, this can't be right. This is a mistake.*

Mom told me what she could, but she didn't know much more than I did. "You're going to have to come home soon," Mom said, "but for now, just try not to eat any sweets and take it easy."

Take it easy? I hung up the phone and looked in my mini fridge. I ate what other kids my age ate. Wasn't I just like them? I twisted the top off a two-liter bottle of soda and guzzled it. I grabbed my dining card and headed for the cafeteria. *God, this can't be happening to me.* I wasn't going to let it. I loaded my tray with pudding, cookies and cake. I ended up vomiting all night long. The next morning I could hardly lift my head off the pillow. It was back to the hospital for me.

"Nicole, you're going to have to accept

Maybe I was in denial, but I decided to live as if

announcer called my name. Malina discreetly pushed me upright. I quickly accepted the award, walked offstage and nearly collapsed.

Mom and Dad took me to the hospital. Doctors ran a battery of tests. I worried about finals. *I've worked too hard to get sick and flunk out now.*

Finally I was released from the hospital and allowed to go back to school. As I crammed for finals, the phone rang. It was Mom. "Nicole, your blood work came back," she said. "Your blood sugar is five hundred and nine."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Well, anything below one hundred twenty-six is normal," she said. There was

your condition and lead a calm, consistent lifestyle," the doctor said. "If you miss a meal, don't get enough sleep or overexert yourself, your blood sugar will fluctuate wildly. Diabetes is nothing to play with. From now on, staying healthy is going to have to be your number one priority. Diabetes is a full-time job."

"What about school? What about pageants?" I asked.

"A college schedule is stressful. You'll have a hard time controlling your blood sugar. You may need to drop out. Pageants are out of the question."

He left, and I slumped back onto my hospital bed. *My life is over,* I thought.

But then a nurse came in, and things



CROWNING GLORY

Nicole shares her tiara wherever she goes.

supposed to have diabetes. I'm not supposed to be sick.

Maybe I was in denial, but I decided to live as if I didn't have a chronic illness. I went back to school and finished my degree. In 1996 I started a graduate program in journalism at Regent University in Virginia Beach. But I never felt normal. I felt like I had a secret flaw that set me apart from everyone else. I frantically watched my blood sugar, always trying to hit the perfect number. The tiniest thing—oversleeping by half an hour, stressing out about a paper, a bite of a cookie—sent my blood sugar in one direction or the other. I ate the same two meals every

I didn't have a chronic illness.

day for lunch and dinner: chicken, rice and green beans, or a turkey sandwich. I told few people at school about my diabetes and even fewer in the pageant circuit. *People always say pageant winners are supposed to be perfect*, I thought. *I don't want anyone to know.* In 1997 I won Miss Apple Blossom, which qualified me for the Miss Virginia pageant. A win there would put me in competition for Miss America.

It took me dozens of pokes into the orange to muster up the courage to stick a needle into my own stomach.

I took a leave from school. Back home in Seminole, Florida, I went to church three times a week. *God, you can fix this*, I prayed at the altar. *I have total faith that you can take this disease away. I'm not*

started to change. "Nicole, having diabetes isn't the end of the world." She put a tray in front of me. It had syringes and an orange on it. "You'll have to give yourself daily insulin shots. So we're going to practice on this orange. You'll get used to it. The point is, if you accept your disease and take care of yourself, you can do anything you set your mind to."

I'd read about insulin pumps, which did away with the need for injections. *It might be easier than sneaking off to check my blood sugar and give myself shots.* Two weeks before the pageant, the pump arrived. I ripped the box open. The device

MODERN-DAY MONITORS

IF YOU HAVE DIABETES, YOU KNOW the hassle of keeping track of your blood sugar. Now you don't have to rely on the old-fashioned finger-prick test. Researchers have developed new devices to make blood sugar monitoring quicker and less painful.

The new generation of blood glucose monitors contains built-in blood-sampling devices that draw blood from parts of the body other than a finger. They cost between sixty and seventy-five dollars and require smaller samples.

Another new product, a monitor worn like a wristwatch, detects blood glucose levels through the skin. Small electrical currents open the skin and draw fluid to a sensor pad attached to the back of the device. Readings are taken every to minutes and stored in the system's electronic memory. An alarm sounds if blood sugar levels become too low or too high.

Even higher-tech: The FDA recently approved the first wireless insulin pump system, which combines glucose monitoring and insulin dosing. The system sends a blood sugar reading to the insulin pump, which performs the "diabetes math" to recommend the proper insulin dosage.



The latest high-tech monitor, a meter watch



A state-of-the-art glucose monitor

—LISA CHENG

was only a little bigger than a pager, but it felt bulky. I tucked it under my waistband and ran to the mirror. The outline was clearly visible. I tried to adjust the pump, but it still looked unsightly. The judges would clearly see it. Everyone would know. *I can't wear this in front of all those people!* So I shoved it back in the box.

At first the Miss Virginia pageant went smoothly. I took my shots, ate right and went to bed at the same time every night. Then the morning of the talent competition, I awoke sprawled on the floor in my hotel room, barely coherent. I was in my mother's arms. Paramedics hovered. Pageant officials peered in the doorway. Breakfast was being set up in the hallway outside; in a matter of minutes the other contestants would be milling around.

"Mom, does anyone know?" were the first words out of my mouth.

"No, Honey, no one knows," she said, rocking me in her arms. "No one knows."

I pleaded with the officials to let me continue. They relented. For weeks I'd been rehearsing a song, "With One Look," from the musical version of *Sunset Boulevard*. I had to get through it. I had to. I'd belt out that number, and everyone would forget what had happened to me that morning. I could forget.

I took the stage. "With one look," I sang in the glare of the spotlight, "I'll be me. I won't be anybody else, and you'll know that it's me."

The words nearly stuck in my throat. Me? Was that who I was really trying to be? Or was I trying to be some perfect substitute for me? Someone who was not the person God created? *I'm standing here in this spotlight pretending to be something I'm not—perfect.*

I only went as far as top 10, but it was one of the best performances of my



AROUND THE CLOCK Nicole and the insulin pump she wears continuously

stand what it's like to live with diabetes.

I went back to the Miss Virginia pageant and stood on the same stage I had sung on the year before. This time I wore my insulin pump proudly. And because of that honesty, this time I won.

At the Miss America pageant, I wore my pump for nearly every event, except swimsuit. I didn't mind that part of the injection site was visible above my suit. *This is who I am*, I thought. *Not perfect, but perfectly me.*

My name was the first one they called for the top 10. And the last one they called

This is who I am, I thought. Not perfect, but perfectly me.

life. When I got home I went on the insulin pump. It didn't matter to me anymore what others would think.

At 23 years old I still had one more year of eligibility in the Miss America system. More and more I realized I couldn't deny the urge I had to speak out about diabetes. I was no longer that 19-year-old college girl in denial about her health. I had taken control of my disease and wanted to help others do the same. Pageants could help me do that.

"Should I give it one more try?" I asked a pageant adviser.

"That thing is going to stop you," he said, pointing to my pump.

He was trying to discourage me, but suddenly everything made sense. God wanted me to compete precisely because I had diabetes. *I'm going all the way to Atlantic City. I'm going to stand up on that stage and make people under-*

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My name was the first one they called for the top 10. And the last one they called

for the top five. Standing in line with the other finalists, I realized I'd finally get my chance to talk about my disease. The host asked me, "What's it like living with a chronic disease?" "It's been a challenge, but it's been a blessing too. I've learned so much from having diabetes. I'm a stronger person." Moments before they announced the winner, I felt a sense of calm come over me. I'd reached my goal. All I wanted was to tell people about my disease—maybe help another young woman who found out she had diabetes too. Hearing the announcer call me Miss America 1999, having the crown placed on my head—that was icing on the cake. I walked down that runway knowing who I was—the person the Lord wanted me to be. What could be more perfect than that? ■

For more on this story, see Family Room.