

A former Miss America reminisces on a night 14 years ago

By Victoria Diaz
special writer

Like a lot of us this Saturday night, Pamela Anne Eldred Levey will be watching the Miss America Pageant on television. Unlike the rest of us, however, as she watches she'll be reliving the night 14 years ago when, as a 21-year-old Mercy College student from West Bloomfield, she was crowned Miss America.

With family and friends in the large, Tudor-style home in Farmington Hills where she lives with husband and daughter, Hilary, 3, the former Miss America will probably shed some tears when the new Miss America is crowned, so vividly does she still remember her big moment.

"I watch the pageant every year," she says. "And when I see the winner walk down the runway, I still get chills because I remember what a wonderful thrill that was. I'll never forget that experience."

Still, she claims she's thankful it's all behind her.

"I thought being Miss America was a marvelous experience and an education in itself," says the slim-as-ever Levey, now 35. "But I felt an awful lot of pressure as Miss America. I knew that any girl in Atlantic City could have won — you know, a different set of judges, a different winner. So, I felt as though I had to be perfect."

LEVEY SAYS her drive "to be perfect" didn't end when she stepped down as Miss America, but persisted for several years after.

During those years, she earned a degree in speech and drama from Mercy College, modelled, did commercials and promotional work, made several guest appearances on television talk shows, studied acting in New York, and went to Europe as part of a USO show,

still convinced that she always should look and act "like Miss America."

"Now, looking back, maybe I put a lot of that pressure on myself trying to live up to that perfect ideal I had of Miss America."

"The night I won, I remember thinking, 'How could this have happened? How could I have won? Miss America is supposed to be perfect.'"

"Afterwards, sometimes I'd think, 'Why did this happen to me?'" Levey claims she's changed drastically since then; that with maturity she's become more accepting and comfortable with herself.

"Now, I know I'm not going to satisfy everybody," she says. "I know not everybody's going to like me and I can live with that and accept it. Now, I don't always have to look wonderful, and that's a wonderful feeling."

"These days, I'm just trying to improve myself as a human being."

IN 1976 she married Jules Levey, a Detroit-area surgeon, and the couple spent the first year of their marriage in Korea, where he was stationed with the U.S. Army. Upon returning to Michigan, they settled in Farmington Hills in 1978.

Levey still pursues an interest in ballet (her on-stage talent in Atlantic City), and is working towards a degree in dietetics at Oakland Community College. In addition, she recently received a state license in cosmetology and electrolysis and is studying to become a licensed skin care specialist.

"I spend most of my time these days going to classes and taking care of Hilary," she says.

"With the help of a decorator, I decorated the house. But I'm not a gourmet cook and, if I can get out of cleaning the house, I certainly will. But I've wanted to stay home with my daughter, and I feel very fortunate we're finan-



Pamela Eldred Levey (at right) is as slim today as she was 14 years ago when she took the title of Miss America. At the time she was a resident of West Bloomfield and a student at Mercy College. Today



she is a Farmington Hills housewife, mother to 3-year-old Hilary and is pursuing a degree in dietetics.

cially able to have me do that.

"I think I'd like to work eventually. But not until she's at least in first grade. Then, I'll probably feel comfortable about it."

How would she feel about her daughter someday competing for the Miss America crown?

"I think she would be in a no-win position," she says. "If she lost, people would say she lost because her mother was Miss America and it would have looked funny if she had won. And I think if she won they might say she won because her mother was Miss America."

LEVEY SAYS she's not been back to the pageant since she passed the Miss America crown on to Texas' Phyllis George in 1970. She was invited back this year to help commemorate Toni's 25th anniversary as a scholarship sponsor, but turned down the invitation because the date conflicted with plans to enroll her daughter in nursery school.

She did serve as a judge this year at the Miss Michigan Pageant in Muskegon, however, along with Montague's Nancy Fleming, Miss America 1981.

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— Pamela Eldred Levey
Miss America 1970

In Levey's opinion, Miss America contestants have changed significantly in recent years.

"Contestants are generally older," she says. "And I think there are girls who really make a study of the pageant. The current Miss America, Debbie Maffett — I believe she said she had competed 25 times in different pageants till she finally became Miss America."

Maffett, 26, representing California, is the oldest Miss America in the pageant's 62-year history.

same all-American-girl-next-door type of thing it used to be."

REMEMBERING the days when feminists staged demonstrations and picketed appearances she made as Miss America, Levey says, "I'm sure they wouldn't do now what they did then."

"And, although I've never categorized myself as a feminist, that doesn't mean I don't agree with their principles," she adds.

"I don't think there should be any limits because someone is a girl or boy or a man or a woman. You should go for what you want. I chose my interests and many feminists are against what I did. But that's where my interests were and that's what I wanted to do."

"I was criticized for it then, of course. And, at that time, it bothered me."

"Now, it doesn't bother me anymore."



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

As Mrs. Jules Levey, the former Miss America received a state license to practice cosmetology and electrolysis, is working toward becoming a licensed skin care specialist as well as toward a degree in dietetics from Oakland Community College. But she says she will wait until her preschooler is in first grade before she seriously considers taking a job.

