

Caledon is home to Miss Universe Canada 2014



By Bill Rea

It's a major honour to be named Miss Universe Canada 2014.

But Cedar Mills resident Chanel Beckenlehner knows it's also going to be a full-time job.

Beckenlehner, 25, won the title May 24 at the St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts, coming out of the competition that involved 65 young women from all over the country.

While this is still essentially a beauty pageant, Beckenlehner said there's more to it than that.

"The big thing for us is our humanitarian work," she observed.

There are two major charities that she's been very involved with.

One is SOS Children's Village, an independent, non-government organization which is active in addressing orphaned and abandoned children's needs, concerns and rights. She said she's raised some \$35,000, and plans to soon travel to Nicaragua to pass the money on.

She pointed out all the contestants had to do some charitable fundraising, but her efforts stood out, as the grand total raised came to about \$132,000.

Another cause she's enthused about is Operation Smile, which is aimed at providing corrective surgery to children in Nicaragua with cleft palates. The operation is expensive, so she's looking forward to helping some of these Third World kids receive the treatment. In addition, Beckenlehner is motivated to help with awareness and prevention of HIV/AIDS, which she said is part of the official platform of the Miss Universe program, and which is an issue she spent a year studying at University of Toronto.

"I really felt in tune with the subject and it made me realize how important our health is," she said. "Without your health, you've got nothing."

She added she considers herself well prepared to be a spokesperson on the topic, talking to kids about testing and prevention, and what to do if they get the virus.

Anti-bullying is another cause that's close to Beckenlehner. While in high school (she attended Huron Heights Secondary School in Newmarket, which is where her mother taught), she put together a program to address these problems, complete with peer guidance, counselling and help working through issues. She's also been able to take the message to other schools, and she expects that activity to increase.

"Now that I'm a public figure, I think it really hits home with them too," Beckenlehner remarked.

Winning the title Miss Universe Canada makes Beckenlehner eligible to vie for Miss Universe, likely to be held sometime in the fall. She said she was expecting the time and location to be announced this past weekend, coinciding with the Miss USA contest. But she said earlier this week there was still no word.

"Hopefully someplace sunny, although anywhere they pick will be an experience," she observed.

Beckenlehner said she expects to be competing against young women from more than 80 countries.

"I feel that we've got a great chance this year," she commented. "I'm going to be the best that I can. There're no regrets in trying your hardest."

Preparation for the Miss Universe competition involves intensive training. "Miss Universe is a job for a year," Beckenlehner observed, pointing out it requires speaking in public, dealing with the media, being fit and psychologically being able to handle the pressure. Her involvement in the program so far has taught her various life skills, such as time management, budgeting, prioritization, as well as communication and people skills.

Beckenlehner thought back to winning the Canadian competition, saying it came down to the last two girls.

"It was the only time I was nervous," she remembered.

"When you win, your life changes at that moment," she said. "I have a unique platform."

Beckenlehner is a woman of many interests. She enjoys golfing, mentioning that she got her first round of the year in last Thursday. She's also active in dressage, having trained at the Federation Equestrian International level and competed nationally. She's been riding since she was two, and owns a German bred Warmblood named Prinz Wilhelm.

"I've always had horses in my life," she said, adding competing some day in the Olympics is among her hopes.

In terms of career plans, Beckenlehner said she would like to work in the media and entertainment industry, possibly as a TV presenter.

But her duties as Miss Universe Canada are taking up the bulk of her time.

"The schedule is never the same," she said. "It's not 9 to 5. It's constantly changing, which makes this job really exciting."