

Blair Abene



Blair Abene is Miss Louisiana of 2008. Her platform is Tourette Syndrome Awareness and as she travels her state during the year of her reign, she is a one-woman awareness campaign. Blair will compete in the Miss America Pageant in January, 2009.

TSA: What responsibilities come with being Miss Louisiana?

Blair: It's not just wearing a crown. The best way to describe it is that it's a job. It's promoting your personal platform and other platforms that are part of the Miss America program and the state of Louisiana. I attend functions and make appearances at schools and civic organizations, meeting with rotary clubs and community groups. It's funny but the week of the Pageant it seems like it's all crown and gown, but it's not all fun and games. I enjoy what I'm doing and it's a personal thing for me but it is work, definitely work.

I started to compete in pageants when I was 14 and found out I needed a personal platform. At 14 my tics were most prevalent. It was the hardest time for me to deal with TS. What better program than something I had a personal experience with? It was important for people who are going through what I did. I talk to students and teachers about Tourette Syndrome. I want to make sure that the teachers understand TS. I want to increase awareness.

TSA: When were you were diagnosed?

Blair: I was 8 years old. It's a normal thing for a lot of kids to be misdiagnosed for a long time. I

had symptoms since I was four or five years old, and for four years we went from doctor to doctor only to be told I had allergies. TS didn't come up in a doctor's office. We figured it out when my mom saw a news special and all subjects used as examples looked like me. She took me to a neurologist. I had been poked and prodded and had my eyes dilated, but TS was not considered a possibility.

TSA: Does anyone else in your family have TS?

Blair: There are a lot of people on my dad's side of the family, including two of my aunts, a cousin and a grandparent, who all show signs of TS, but were never officially diagnosed with TS. I don't have any siblings with TS, either.

TSA: How were things at school and at home for you?

Blair: It started off as strange habits, but the longer it went on, the more it became a big deal at home and an even bigger deal at school. Kids can be cruel and didn't have any idea of what it was. At home, my family was more compassionate.

I was blinking at 4 years old. Blinking constantly and squeezing my eyes until I wore myself out. As time went on tics evolved and, depending on the day, sometimes I'd be spinning around and around counting everything. A lot of my symptoms are OCD. Now all that's left is the OCD. I still have times when I have to check things; make sure I lock the door, and check it again and again.

It still takes me a little longer to take tests because I have to check

things. I do well in school, but it takes a little longer.

Now, when I get stressed out I blink more. When I was younger it never went away and it was the worst when I was an adolescent. I didn't feel comfortable in my own skin and TS was a nightmare. I'm 22 now, and it's so much better.

TSA: What do you think of the way the media portrays people with TS and other neurological disorders?

Blair: I have a really good sense of humor and I'm able to laugh about it, but I don't think that it's good that TS is always portrayed as outbursts. In interviews I'm asked every time about coprolalia outbursts. I just assume that they don't understand that TS is complex. From the media point of view coprolalia is TS. This misconception dehumanizes it. It's not funny. It's not funny at all.

TSA: Do you have any advice for teenage girls with TS?

Blair: I wish there was a quick fix of advice. I know that it's something that you wake up to everyday. The only thing you can do is embrace it, and use it to make yourself a stronger person. I think it's a big reason why I have become such a positive person. I turned a weakness into a strength. Keep reminding yourself not to feel sorry for yourself and that there are much more serious conditions.

Having a supportive group of friends helped me. I had friends who could joke about it with me. My family was very supportive. There is no magical advice. Just hang on. Try to embrace it and look at it as something that will make you stronger.

TSA: Do you have any stress relief tips for adults with TS?

Blair: Even during my Miss Louisiana interviews my symptoms come out under stress. Exercise is a great stress reliever. I'm a music major. I love to sing and that's a stress release, too. It's funny, the more research I've done, the more I've noticed that there are a lot of people linked to music who have TS. When I began to get involved with music, it was about the time I was beginning to have TS. I've played piano since I was five. I wonder how much worse it would have been had I not had music.

TSA: What's next for you — more pageant competition, school?

Blair: There's the Miss America reality show on TLC, which starts to air the end of November. All 50 contestants will live in a house together. I'm sure it'll be a stressful situation. I'm sure my blinking and OCD will be evident. It's also an opportunity for me to promote my platform with the other girls. Then it's back to school to finish my BA in performance.

TSA: For the opera fans in the TSA family, what will you sing at the Miss America Pageant?

Blair: For Miss Louisiana, I sang Puccini's 'Nessun Doma' but it has been taken by another contestant. I'm not singing an aria this time because we only have 90 seconds for the song. That affects what you pick. I'm doing, 'Because We Believe' which was written for the 2006 Olympics and performed by Andrea Bocelli. It's not a traditional aria, but I'm excited about it. ■