

Phillips: Program has ‘changed so many young ladies’ lives’

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But Phillips' enthusiasm for the program — which has provided approximately \$2 million in scholarships to young women over the past 15 years — runs deep, and she plans to reroute her focus to the Oregon Scholarship Foundation in an effort to increase the monetary awards given to contestants.

What Phillips is taking with her is a sense of pride in having led a program that gives young women confidence, support and, often, a chance to achieve the improbable.

“This program means a great deal to me,” Phillips said. “It’s changed so many young ladies’ lives, and it isn’t just because a crown goes on their head. It’s all the young ladies that have gone through and have had the opportunity to go to colleges that they wouldn’t have because of scholarship opportunities. We’re not asking anything other than for them to believe in themselves and set goals and try to achieve those goals. And we open the door and allow them to walk down that road. It’s so rewarding for all of us.”

A change of heart

Although her parents both were involved in the program — her mom was chaperone to Miss Oregon 1959 and her dad ran the Miss Portland pageant — Phillips was a theater major at Portland State University and very anti-pageant — that is, until one of her friends became Miss Oregon, and it sucked her in, she said.

In the early 1970s, Phillips started working on the Miss Portland pageant, which is a preliminary to the Miss Oregon pageant. When she

moved to Seaside in 1979, her husband, Steve, was running the Miss Oregon Scholarship Program as a co-executive director. Seven years later, it was Phillips.

“I always laughingly say I didn’t like the way he was running it, so I took over,” she joked.

Around the time of transition, the Phillips and a few others had recognized the program needed to grow in terms of the scholarship dollars distributed, and they knew the way to do that was by setting up a nonprofit foundation with a separate board of directors. The Oregon Scholarship Foundation now handles the scholarship money for Miss Oregon, as well as the memorial scholarships the Phillips set up in the name of their daughter, Tiffany.

During the pageant, contestants can win about \$60,000 in Miss Oregon scholarships and special awards, and about \$350,000 of in-kind scholarships to various schools in and out of state. Young men and women who help with operation and production also can receive scholarship awards.

Phillips said she believes, however, the program could do better, especially at the teen level. She wants to see the prize for Miss Oregon to double to \$20,000 and the prize for Miss Oregon’s Outstanding Teen to double to \$6,000. When she joins the foundation, she plans to write grants and find other ways to make that possible.

What has been accomplished, though, has been life-changing for some contestants, who have gone on to work in politics, engineering, economics, education and numerous other fields.

“When I look back to 44 years of involvement in this organization, as a

volunteer, we put money into it. We don’t receive a penny for what we do,” she added.

The only paid people are from the production group that handles lighting and sound; their payment comes from ticket sales and fundraising, not entry fees or other sources designated for the scholarship fund. Everyone else volunteers.

“Nobody can understand how supportive this community is to the Miss Oregon Scholarship Program and has been since it started in 1947,” Phillips said.

People donate time, meals, rooms and funds. “It’s mind-boggling,” she said. “And it’s really heartfelt enthusiasm they have for this program.”

A pageant family

When reflecting on which aspect of the program she takes the most pride in, Phillips said it would have to be that the first Miss Oregon, Jo Ann Amorde, is still involved, although now at a local level as she progresses in age.

“We have so many of our past contestants, past Miss Oregons, past Miss Oregon families, past contestant families still being involved in the pageant,” Phillips said. “We call ourselves a pageant family and we really are.”

That became evident in a personal way when the Phillips lost Tiffany in a car accident in 1998 shortly after she turned 17. Phillips was supposed to fly to a National Association of Miss America State Pageants meeting in New York when the accident occurred. She didn’t attend the workshop, but when her counterparts heard what happened, “the phone calls kept coming in,” she said. They also raised

about \$50,000 to set up a memorial fund in Tiffany’s name. The family received a great deal of support from the Miss America organization, other individuals affiliated with the program and the Seaside community, Phillips said.

Tiffany — a 6-foot-4-inch star athlete — was never a contestant herself, but she liked the behind-the-scenes aspect and was close to the Miss Oregon winners who would stay with the family.

“She was one of those young ladies who was always willing to help others and believed in making sure people understood that you can pick up your own bootstraps and you do whatever you want to do,” she said.

Tiffany “was a miracle child,” and though she was unexpected, Phillips said, “we were so blessed to have had her, but too short.” Her spirit remains, however. “She’s my guardian angel,” Phillips said.

Having Tiffany also gave Phillips a deeper understanding and ability to form relationships with the Miss Oregon winners. Growing up, she didn’t babysit and she didn’t like being around children.

“Then Tiffany came into my life,” she said. “It just gives you an insight, to have a little person that you made and that you can sit there and enjoy and mentor. It gives you an insight that I wouldn’t have had without that. I didn’t really have the true heart of it until I had my own child. And I think that’s one of the reasons Steve and I have stayed so involved is because of the heartache so many of these young people go through in life because they don’t have or come from loving families. And there isn’t anybody to be supportive and there isn’t anybody to

lift them up and say, ‘you can achieve whatever you want to achieve.’”

From not being particularly fond of children, Phillips now has been “accumulating daughters in a special way by being involved in this organization” for several decades.

“These young ladies are the legacy that we’ve helped build in this program,” she said. “Our daughters — our Miss Oregons — are very special.”

Moving on

Phillips has enjoyed her 44-year tenure with the program, but “it’s time to turn it over and let new blood come in with their new ideas and move forward,” she said.

She’s content with the work she has done. She’s been an advocate for fostering equality, openness and anti-discrimination within the program — at one point, a woman could not compete if she had an abortion. Phillips quickly dismissed a sponsor when one of its representatives made derogatory remarks about a black woman being crowned Miss Oregon.

In addition to helping with the foundation, she will continue on as chairwoman of the Miss America State Trade Show, which supports the Tiffany Phillips Memorial Scholar-Athlete Award, open to any contestant in the United States.

When Phillips retires, three former Miss Oregon winners will take over. April Robinson and Nichole (Mead) Lahner will handle the Miss Oregon component and Stephenie (Steers) West will focus on Miss Oregon’s Outstanding Teen.

“I feel really good about it, because they understand the heart of the program,” Phillips said.

Meade: ‘I always love to come back here. I love this area’

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Since then, Meade’s career has taken her to stages around the world.

“An airplane is really my home. It’s where I am more than anywhere,” she jokes.

Grand finale

This weekend, Meade will take a break from her globe-trotting lifestyle to make her fourth appearance at the Astoria Music Festival. She will perform in the grand finale opera Sunday as the title role of Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots in Donizetti’s “Maria Stuarda.”

For those unfamiliar with opera or Meade’s talent, Astoria Music Festival artistic director Keith Clark compares her to a young Tiger Woods, the accomplished professional golfer.

“She is at the top of her game,” Clark said. “She is one of the stellar sopranos of her generation singing all over the world. Her career has just skyrocketed to the point where she has been wonderful in making time available to come to Astoria, when she could be singing anywhere in the world.”

Meade said she looks forward to her annual return to the Northwest. In August, she is performing at Opera in the Park during Portland Summerfest. While in Astoria, she plans to see her best friend who lives in Portland and her father, Rod



JOSHUA BESSEX — The Daily Astorian
Angela Meade, right, and Aaron Blake, left, rehearse with the Astoria Music Festival Orchestra at the Masonic Lodge Thursday.

Meade, who lives in Centralia and works as a research forester for Weyerhaeuser.

“I always love to come back here. I love this area,” Meade said. “I would live here full time if I could. It’s so relaxing and peaceful and people are so friendly. Doing what we do, it’s not feasible to live here at the moment, which is kind of sad.”

After her performance Sunday, Meade and her father will roadtrip down to Santa Fe, N.M., where her husband, John Matthew Myers, a professional tenor, is performing. Meade has hardly seen her husband since they married last month. The couple met in 2010 while performing at the Wexford Festival Opera in Ireland.

Musical family

“reveal that they seek not to denigrate marriage but rather to live their lives, or honor their spouses’ memory, joined by its bond,” Kennedy said.

As he read his opinion, spectators in the courtroom wiped away tears after the import of the decision became clear. One of those in the audience was James Obergefell, the lead plaintiff in the Supreme Court fight.

Outside, Obergefell held up a photo of his late spouse, John, and said the ruling establishes that “our love is equal.” He added, “This is for you, John.”

President Barack Obama placed a congratulatory phone call to Obergefell, which he took amid a throng of reporters outside the courthouse.

Speaking a few minutes later at the White House, Obama praised the decision as “justice that arrives like a thunderbolt.” He said it was an affirmation of the principle that “all Americans are created equal.”

The four dissenting justices each filed a separate opinion explaining his views, but they all agreed that states and their voters should have been left with the power to decide who can marry.

“This court is not a leg-

Music has always been a part of Meade’s family. Her father played the steel guitar and her mother, Deborah Meade, grew up singing in a trio of girls that toured churches.

“She always wanted to be a professional singer, but her parents didn’t really think it was the good, religious, Christian thing to do,” Meade said of her mother. “She would always live vicariously through me.”

Meade’s mother died of breast cancer in July 2012.

“It was the most difficult thing I’ve ever been through, especially since I had a gig right after it,” Meade said. “I wanted in the worst way to stay home and grieve.”

Before her death, Deborah Meade was able to see her daughter’s career launch at the

islature. Whether same-sex marriage is a good idea should be of no concern to us,” Chief Justice John Roberts wrote in dissent. Roberts read a summary of his dissent from the bench, the first time he has done so in nearly 10 years as chief justice.

“If you are among the many Americans of whatever sexual orientation who favor expanding same-sex marriage, by all means celebrate today’s decision,” Roberts said. “But do not celebrate the Constitution. It had nothing to do with it.”

Justice Antonin Scalia said he was not concerned so much about same-sex marriage but about “this court’s threat to American democracy.” Justices Samuel Alito and Clarence Thomas also dissented.

President Barack Obama welcomed the decision via Twitter, calling it “a big step in our march toward equality.”

The ruling will not take effect immediately because the court gives the losing side roughly three weeks to ask for reconsideration. But some state officials and county clerks might decide there is little risk in issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples.

Met and watch her daughter become a mainstay in the opera community.

“It was really hard for me. I sing a lot of characters that kill themselves or are dying of something,” Meade said. “For a year afterward, I would be doing these death scenes and burst out in tears in the middle of rehearsal.”

Two months after her mother’s death, Meade recalls doing a production where she had to pray over a coffin. She could not handle the scene. The conductor came over and asked if she was OK.

“People thought I was crazy for a while,” she said. “I would burst into tears and walk off stage.”

In some ways, working through her grief become therapeutic. As time passed, Meade’s career continued to grow. She performs between 35 to 50 performances a year.

It all started while she took voice lessons at Centralia College and realized opera was what she wanted to do. Meade said she became obsessed and listened to opera CDs, watched live performances and read about opera stars in books. Soon those pro-

fessionals became her colleagues and friends.

Last fall, Meade graced the cover of “Opera News,” the go-to magazine of the opera world.

As accolades pile up, Meade said, she never forgets her Northwest roots.

In those moments before a large performance, Meade thinks back to her start in Centralia and Tacoma and performances in Astoria. She knows she is doing what she loves and has made her mother and father proud.

“Eight years in, it’s still surreal,” Meade said. “I hope it always remains surreal.”

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