



Hamel's McKenna Vereeke Is First Runner-Up In Prestigious Miss Illinois Scholarship Organization Pageant

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
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EDWARDSVILLE - McKenna Vereeke was recognized recently on a high echelon for not only her natural beauty and intellect but her talent as a musician and passion for certain social issues.

The Hamel native placed second in the Miss Illinois Scholarship Organization Pageant Competition recently out of 26 qualifiers. The pageant is part of the Miss America Pageant competition. She is a full-time student at the University of Illinois-Springfield. McKenna is the daughter of Dawn and Chris Vereeke.

McKenna was a 2020 Edwardsville High School graduate. Her part of the Miss Illinois Scholarship Organization Talent Show was a beautiful violin performance of “Praeludium and Allegro” by Fritz Kreisler.

She also presented her social impact initiative “Active Minds: Changing the Conversation About Mental Health” and it was very well received by judges.

“I walked in hoping to be in the top 10, and I am 20 and one of the younger participants,” she said. “The oldest you can be is age 26. When they called my name for the top 11 I was super happy and when I made the top five it was more than I ever expected. They called off the fourth runners-up, third, and second and when it wasn’t me I thought this is happening and I had worked so hard for it since I was a teen. I was so proud to be first runner-up to Monica Jones.”

McKenna qualified for the state pageant by capturing the Miss Kankakee County crown. She competed in the state event as a Miss River Valley entry. She also had a private interview as part of the competition prior to advancing to the finals.

She competed in a preliminary night in evening gown and talent competition. The social initiative portion was the next day of the pageant. Only 11 advanced to the finals. The finalists competed again in red carpet wear and social initiative categories.

McKenna will receive a \$3,000 scholarship for her second-place finish.

The EHS grad said she loves the University of Illinois-Springfield experience and is a key member of the renowned UIS orchestra.

“The UIS campus is great with fantastic professors and is a little smaller than some universities,” she said. “They want every student who goes there to have an opportunity to connect with the professors. Victoria Voumard, the Edwardsville High School orchestra director, helped me with UIS to obtain a large scholarship. Victoria has been a huge inspiration in my life, starting when she taught me in sixth grade.

“Victoria was my very first orchestra teacher in junior high and taught me for four years in high school. She is always so supportive of every single one of her students. I now teach some private students part-time and I try to reflect in my work with the students

what she taught me with her kindness. Kindness is something students never forget in a teacher.”

McKenna is focused on a psychology degree in clinical and counseling at UIS.

“I want to focus on either relationship counseling or become an industrial/organizational psychologist,” she said.

Video Announcement Of McKenna's Spot In Top Pageant's Five:

<https://youtu.be/ZCtw4E5K038>

McKenna said in regard to music, the violin is her first love. She thanked her parents for paying for 16 years of violin lessons, her violins, and the support they gave her both in music and her academic spectrum. She said her parents have always been in her corner as positive influences.

The Hamel native plans to receive a music minor at UIS. She said she loves participating in pageants and hopes to continue in that quest.

“It feels natural and I always enjoy it,” she said of pageants. “When I was 17 and a senior in high school I went to the New York Fashion Week and walked in shows. That is also something I will never forget.”

She closed and said, nothing at the present time tops the experience of the Miss Illinois Scholarship Organization Pageant and her first runner-up honor.

