

SIU Medical Student Jessica Tilton Vies For Miss America Crown On January 14, 2024

by Submitted by SIU School of Medicine
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On Christmas Eve 2021, Jessica Tilton saw a little TikTok video that inspired her to dream big.

A young woman wearing a ruby red evening gown climbed the steps of an academic building. The onscreen text read: “Competing in pageants to help pay for medical school.” The woman passed behind a column and emerged on the other side, now in a white coat and blue scrubs. The text changed to: “Becoming a doctor thanks to Miss America.”

Three weeks later, Tilton was walking onstage with the contestants in the Miss Central Illinois competition.

And on January 14, 2024, she will represent the state of Illinois in the Miss America competition, broadcast live from Orlando.

She has had an exciting and busy two years.

And as thrilling as her achievement is, Jessica has another, larger goal. She is halfway through her first year at Southern Illinois University School of Medicine in Carbondale. According to plan, scholarships from the Miss America Opportunity have indeed helped fund her education.

Jessica is a small-town girl striving for one of the most famous titles in American pop culture. And she also hopes to become a physician and a healer who would make her grandparents proud.

Her story is one of grit and determination, of perseverance and poise in the face of long odds.

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Miss Illinois 2023 was born in Texas 25 years ago. Young Jessica Tilton moved to Washington, Illinois, when she was 7 years old. She considers her small-town upbringing idyllic, but a mixed blessing. “Part of why I got into medicine is because I really want to help others in rural and underserved communities,” she said.

An interest in medicine was fostered through a youth spent in sports and gymnastics. Aches and strains caused trips to an orthopedic physician’s office. At the entrance to the clinic, a gallery of doctors’ photos greeted her, all men.

She made a mental note: “I want to be the first female physician on the mural, to someday inspire other little girls to achieve their dreams.”

The more she learned about physiology and how muscles and bone work together, the more she wanted to explore a potential health care career. In high school, she enrolled in community college courses to become a certified nursing assistant. The same weekend she received her high school diploma, Tilton earned her CNA license.

Studying biology at Bradley University, she conducted research on cocaine’s effect on juveniles. She worked in a molecular lab analyzing RT-PCR tests during the height of COVID, while studying as a full-time student. She graduated with bachelor’s and master’s of science degrees in biology.

But in the middle of pursuing those degrees came a terrifying accident that nearly derailed her dreams.

On a Hawaiian vacation when she was 20, Tilton was struck by a lava bomb that left her with a shattered hip, sacrum, femur and tibia. Over the next four years, she endured physical therapy, relearned how to walk, and went through five different surgeries.

Following college graduation, she taught biology courses at Bradley University and supervised a group of research students for two years before applying to medical school. She also coached the color guard squad at Washington High School, her alma mater.

When Tilton took her first tentative steps into the pageant competition circuit, she channeled her personal interests into the mix. She enjoyed the creativity of sewing her outfits and dresses and drew upon her muscle memory from years of gymnastics and color guard. She competed for Miss Illinois in June 2022 and lost.

She used the loss as motivation. “I knew I wanted to improve. I watched tape like a basketball player, sought out a coach and worked on my interviewing skills,” she said.

While teaching at Bradley, Miss America became her “second job.” With coaching, determination and teamwork, Jessica competed and won the local title of Miss Quad Cities, a preliminary competition to Miss Illinois, and returned to Miss Illinois in June 2023. This time she won.

Her talent in the Miss America competition will be a flag performance, the first time it has ever been done in the national pageant. In both medical research and pageants, novelty is prized. She is also championing organ donation in her platform, a cause very personal to her. Tilton’s paternal grandfather had polycystic kidney disease (PKD).

“It was a spontaneous mutation, and he didn't find out until he was in his 40s,” she said. “Unfortunately, by that point, his kidneys were pretty far gone, and he needed a transplant to survive. But because of a donor, I got to grow up with him.”

Jessica's father and aunt both have PKD and have received kidney transplants. Her dad got the call that a donor kidney had been found and had his surgery in February. “My youngest sister and two cousins also have PKD. Since I don't have the gene, I plan on being a living kidney donor,” she said.

“I remember going with my grandparents to Gifts of Hope and Donate Life events at Wildlife Prairie Park in Peoria when I was younger, and listening to my grandpa tell his story. Now, I volunteer in my grandpa's place with Gift of Hope and read his speech at various organ donation events.”

Tilton has no trouble with public speaking, and she credits her highly honed interviewing skills for helping her get into medical school. “This Miss America Opportunity has pushed me in so many aspects of life, and it's made me a better person,” she said.

Since arriving at SIU, she's been grateful for the camaraderie and backing she's received from her peers. “I have the best classmates; they show up at all my events,” she said. “I'm incredibly fortunate to have this amazing support group down here with me. We've all bonded and they're just as excited as I am.”

The medical school and several local sponsors treated Tilton to a send-off celebration at the Carbondale Civic Center on December 9. Her fellow students, faculty and staff from the medical school, family and pageant supporters were given a sneak peek of her attire and a preview of her competition schedule. It's busy.

She flies to Florida this week to begin rehearsals and preliminary events. When Tilton finally takes the stage in Orlando on Sunday evening, January 14, she'll be one of the 51 contestants who have done amazing and unique things with their lives.

Considering the journey she has taken to get there, you can't help but feel that Jessica Tilton is already a winner.

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The Miss America competition can be viewed for free on the livestream WatchMissAmerica.com beginning at 6 p.m. CST, Sunday, January 14. Follow Jessica on Facebook, X and Instagram.