

REIGNING ROYALTY —

WISCONSIN'S VERY OWN MISS AMERICA, LAURA KAEPELER

BY LISA SCHMELZ

Welcome to Wisconsin — land of cheese, Packers, Brewers and for the rest of 2012, drum roll, please, Miss America. On Jan. 14, before a live television audience of millions, Kenosha native Laura Kaeppler took the crown that — ever the humble Midwesterner — she never thought she'd win.

Her goal? Just to make the semi-finals.

"It's been surreal," said the 23-year-old Kaeppler in a phone interview. "I was proud to just put us on the map with the top 15, 10 and five."

Kaeppler is the second Miss Wisconsin to take the Miss America title. In 1973, Terry Meeuwesen of De Pere, now a co-host of the Christian Broadcasting Network's 700 Club, wore the crown.

Speaking of the crown, Kaeppler confirmed the following: There is only one; it is not made of real diamonds; she does not wear it all the time; it is surprisingly lightweight and comfortable; and only once has a TSA agent asked her why she had the mark of royalty in her carry-on baggage.

"He asked 'What do you do? Because you have a crown in your suitcase,' which I thought was kind of funny," said Kaeppler, laughing. "I told him I needed it for work."

Kaeppler is a 2010 Carthage College graduate and holds a B.A. in music, with a vocal performance emphasis. An opera singer who has performed at Carnegie Hall, she sang an Italian folk song for the pageant's talent competition. While breaking Wisconsin's 39-year Miss America dry spell, Kaeppler will make children of incarcerated parents her platform.

For her, the issue is personal. Just as she was preparing to graduate from high school, her father was sentenced to 18 months in federal prison for mail fraud. According to court records, Jeff Kaeppler stole \$122,000 that customers of a real estate venture had intended as investments, depositing the funds into his own checking account and mailing an investor a statement stating the money had been invested with the firm.

If she's supposed to feel ashamed of her father or his criminal record, she didn't get the memo. After winning the pageant, the beaming father was by her side at a backstage news conference.

"It is my story and it is my background," Kaeppler said. "But I don't let that change who I am or define who I am. This is part of who I am, and at the same time, it's made me the woman that I am."

Kaeppler plans to use her \$50,000 Miss America scholarship for

law school and then pursue a career in child advocacy.

While reigning as Miss America, she wants children whose parents are or have been behind bars to know they are not alone, and that a parent's crimes don't have to be roadblocks for their kids.

If they don't believe her, she only has to point to the crown on her head.



"This is something I never dreamed could happen," she said. "I never thought that the girl who had a parent in prison could be Miss America one day." [ew](#)

MISS AMERICA'S FOUR WISCONSIN MUST-SEES:

Miller Park — It's what we do in Wisconsin when the weather warms up.

Lambeau Field — It's the holy grail to be here.

The Spot Drive-In in Kenosha — They have the best burgers I've ever had in my life. (Kaeppler worked here as a car hop while in school.)

Lake Michigan — I went to Carthage College and I spent a lot of my time on the shores of Lake Michigan. It's so beautiful. I would have to say anyplace on the shoreline is a must.