

Mothers

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the national competition. As far as Stevens knows, the Yankton women represent something that has rarely – if ever – occurred since the contest began in 1935.

“Having a mother-daughter combination (the same year) is a very unique situation,” Stevens said.

The Yankton women said they were honored but stunned when they learned Stevens had nominated both of them for state honors and a chance at the national title.

“Joyce asked me questions about my mom, and I learned she also asked my mom questions about me. But she told each of us to keep it a secret, so my mom and I didn’t talk about it with each other,” Koerner said.

Starzl said she was as proud to see her daughter in the national spotlight as she was to make her own national appearance.

“I’m just so proud to have Elizabeth as my daughter,” Starzl said. “Seeing her at the national contest made me feel like I must have done something right (raising her), leading by example. I’m proud of that.”

In determining the contest categories, the American Mothers organization generally looks at the ages of the entrants’ children, Stevens said. “If it’s for Young Mother of the Year, most of the children are under the age of 18. The Mother of the Year generally has children over age 18,” she said.

Entrants must write an essay and submit letters of recommendation.

In addition, they fill out a portfolio featuring their involvement in areas such as education, involvement with their faith, their roles in the community and their philosophy on mothering and what mothering means to them.

IMPACTING LIVES

Starzl and Koerner are impacting not only their own families but hundreds of other children as well.

Starzl and her husband, Calvin, recently celebrated their 43rd wedding anniversary. They have raised eight children – five girls and three boys – and have 25 grandchildren. Calvin has been a long-haul truck driver most of their married life, so Lynn was raising the children and running the household by herself much of the time.

Lynn lost both of her parents at a very young age and was raised by her paternal grandmother at age 12. Lynn always dreamed of being a mother and wanted to be home with her children. After her fourth child, she started a daycare in her home which she has operated for 35 years. She currently provides daycare for a maximum of 12 children ages two months through 6 years old.

Starzl used her experiences as a mother and daycare provider as the basis for her “Mother of the Year” speech.

“In my speech (at the national contest), I talked about my policy of choices, consequences and respect,” she said. “Those are three things I stress in my daycare and daily life.”

As far as raising her family, Starzl said the eight children formed a bond even with the large age difference – about 25 years – from the oldest to youngest child.

“The love is there, and everybody works together,” she said. “Elizabeth was Number Four (in birth order), and she let us know she was the middle child. She was the mediator and the one who tried to make everything fair.”

Koerner said she learned a great deal from her mother from childhood to the present day.

“I learned patience with younger kids and how to treat others with kindness and generosity,” Koerner said. “I also learned service from my mother – you really need to give back and to work hard for everything that you have.”

Koerner also learned a great deal from growing up in a daycare setting.

“I always had friends. I never got bored in the summertime, and we played a lot of board games. We didn’t have cable, so TV wasn’t much of an option,” she said.

“We did a lot of dramatic plays. We used to do ‘Little House On The Prairie’ during the summer. It was a popular television show at the time, and I had family grow up close to DeSmet (a setting for the book), so we heard a lot about the stories and got to see the home (featured in the book).”

Koerner has drawn on many of those experiences in raising her family. She and her husband, David Koerner, were married in 2001 and have three daughters ages 8, 6 and 3.

In addition, she has used her childhood experiences in her teaching career. She graduated from the University of South Dakota in Vermillion with a bachelor’s degree in elementary education and an emphasis in early childhood. A few years later, she received her master’s degree as a

reading specialist.

During the past 11 years, she has taught at Sacred Heart School in Yankton. She initially taught middle school for eight years but now teaches pre-school, working with students ages 3-6.

“Sometimes, it’s hard to separate the two, being a mom and teacher,” she said. “But I just feel like all the kids need love and they need faith, and God has called me to do that.”

In her speech at the national contest, she offered her greatest advice to parents to stay stress free: Play with your children.

“It really is the foundation for all of their development. Kids can learn academically, and they can learn something about consequences and choices,” she said.

D.C. BOUND

While in Washington, Starzl and Koerner stayed near the White House and visited landmarks in the nation’s capital. However, the women noted the most memorable moments may have come from the week’s speakers.

The Yankton women pointed to the message of Robin McGraw, the wife of television personality Dr. Phil McGraw. Mrs. McGraw also serves as a philanthropist, entrepreneur, television personality and two-time #1 *New York Times* bestselling author. She remains committed to her mission of inspiring women to live their best lives.

Mrs. McGraw emphasized the need for mothers to tend to their own needs as well as their family’s needs, Starzl said. “(McGraw) said you need to take care of yourself and be there for your youngsters,” she said.

The national conference also featured Rwandan speakers who survived abuse, war and genocide in their African nation.

“They were survivors, but they were also forgiving. It was amazing how they could do it,” Starzl said. “Here (in the United States), everybody seems to carry a grudge and they don’t speak (to each other) over just silly things. Then, you see something (like the Rwandan survivors) and they’re able to forgive. It’s wonderful when you can forgive. Otherwise, you carry a heavy burden.”

Starzl and Koerner agree on the importance of honoring all mothers, giving credit to American Mothers for promoting the family role. The Yankton women are interested in starting a South Dakota chapter for the national organization.

“It’s nice to get recognized,” Starzl said. “As mothers, we’re always doing something so routine and day to day. Many people don’t know what we do until it doesn’t get done.”

The Yankton mother and daughter encourage everyone to attend Sunday’s open house not just for the women’s state titles but as a celebration of all mothers on Mother’s Day and the community’s support for families.

“It’s a very special treat, to be able to share (the honor) with the Yankton community that’s been so supportive of us over the years,” Koerner said.

“It’s not just one person – it takes a community to raise children, and Yankton has done an amazing job. I’ve learned so much from my parents, my parish and Yankton.”

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