

Jessica Rayburn Reflects On The Best, Worst Of The Year

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PARADISE (Lancaster Co.) — "It's been the best and worst year of my life — with daddy leaving and not being able to do some things. . . but it's also been a wonderful experience to have represented my state at the National Grange," said Jessica Rayburn.

Poised, fluent, strong, talented, and patriotic are some of the words that describe Jessica Rayburn.

Although only 16 years old, Jessica appears to be much more mature. Perhaps that's because she has needed to assume more responsibility since her father was sent to Germany as a member of the National Guard.

"Our family has always been there for each other, and Daddy's leaving has even brought us closer," Jessica said. "We've handled this as a family."

It tears at Jessica's heartstrings to watch her 2-year-old sister Sylvia and 11-year-old brother Ben deal with the sadness of separation.

Jessica helps her mom with parenting and home responsibilities. She said, "Since daddy has left, I've had to mature. I'm probably more serious than my peers because this has forced me to experience sadness and realize the value of money."

Grandpa and Grandma Coates have always played a major role in Jessica's life. It was through them that Jessica became acquainted with the Grange. She attended local and county meetings with them, and as soon as she was old enough to become a member, Jessica joined the Grange.

She sometimes plays the piano at local Grange events. But this year, for the first time, Jessica competed in the regional talent contest. Although an accomplished pianist with six years of lessons, Jessica wowed the judges by playing a sonatina by Clemente by memorization.

Judges expressed that they thought the ability to play the piece through memorization rather than reading the music made Jessica appear more professional. The talent competition is divided into three categories: instrumental, vocal, and other acts. A best of show is selected from the first-place winner in each category.

Jessica was surprised and thrilled to be selected at the regional competition, and even more delighted to be selected as the state winner. This qualified her to attend the National Grange Convention in Oregon. Expenses were paid by the local Elizabethtown and state Granges.

Her grandfather Robert Coates flew to Oregon with her.

"Playing at the national



The year 2002 has been an emotional roller coaster ride for 16-year-old Jessica Rayburn. She bid her dad farewell when his National Guard Unit was sent overseas. "We have always been a really close family, and this has really changed us," Jessica said. Recently, Jessica won "Best of Show" for her musical talent in regional and state Grange competition, which enabled her to represent Pennsylvania in the National Grange Convention in Oregon. Shown with Jessica are her mother Janice and Grandfather Robert Coates.

Grange is not for placement but the privilege of providing part of the entertainment," Jessica said. "I was very relaxed and not nervous at all."

Jessica also serves as a Grange ambassador and attended workshops where she developed friendships with people from all over the U.S.

According to Grange rules, Jessica will not be able to compete at next year's talent competition.

"The Grange teaches agriculture history, leadership, and giving back to the community. The Grange wants youth to become future leaders just like 4-H," Jessica said.

She is also very active in 4-H, where she won county talent competitions for reciting the poem, "The Flag," an appropriate poem for her.

Jessica's dad had served in the Armed Forces for three years when Jessica was a baby. The family has always been strongly patriotic. After the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, Jessica's dad (a medic at a veteran's hospital) felt he should do something to help the country. He joined the National Guard, which hadn't been stationed outside the U.S. since the mid 1950s. However, in July 2002, his unit was sent to Germany, where they serve in

"forced protection," described by Jessica as securing entry points, power plants, bases, and airports.

On Veteran's Day, Jessica helped to raise and lower flags to be retired at the Veterans' Hospital, Coatesville.

"We change the flags because we never want a tattered flag to fly," Jessica said.

This year's event was very emotional, she said. In addition to the personal connection with having her dad serving the country, a retired flag was presented to a woman whose son is missing in action.

Jessica would like others, especially youth, to be more aware of the sacrifice veterans have made in protecting the country.

"Many of my peers have no concept of what our veterans have gone through," Jessica said.

In public school during her elementary years, Jessica was distressed to notice that only a few students actually recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

"Most are not saying anything, or they are gazing out the window," she said.

After the terrorist attacks, many more recited the Pledge, but Jessica fears participation is dwindling off again.

Jessica cherishes the memory of her dad visiting her at Camp Manatawny in Berks County before he left for active duty.

She said that the 150 campers stood up and clapped for several minutes when he entered the meeting room.

The Rayburn family is also sponsoring a military mailbag to see that 38 men will receive at least 8-10 letters.

Jessica has had a non-traditional education. From kindergarten through fourth grade she attended public school, then she attended a private school, and later was homeschooled for several years. Many people will be surprised to know that although Jessica is an excellent student she has quit high school.

But that doesn't mean she has ceased her education. She explained, "I think there are other ways to receive an education, and I do plan to go to college."

She has a plan. She will begin taking classes at the local branch of Harrisburg Area Community College (HACC) in January. By the time she is 18, she should have 30 college credits, which will automatically give her a GED (general education diploma).

With her dad absent, some of her activities have been curtailed because her mom doesn't have as much time to transport her to as

many events. One of these was the state 4-H Days.

Both Jessica and her mother are deeply committed to local 4-H involvement. Her mom is organizational leader. Her dad taught riflery until he was stationed overseas.

Jessica has been a member of 4-H for eight years, and has served as president of the community club and been active in sewing, weaving, rug braiding, blacksmithing, riflery, and square dancing clubs. This is her fifth year with the square dancing club, but the first time the club competed at the State Farm Show. Her brother will also compete.

Jessica won a State Farm Show prize for a 4-H project — gold leaf lettering on a clock, and has participated in potato judging. Most unusual was being selected as an 11-year-old to present a speech on E.coli.

Her interest in E.coli began when her dad showed her how the germs looked under a microscope. About the same time, three boys died from contracting the e-coli bacteria through undercooked meat.

"I thought others need to know about E.coli so it doesn't happen to them," Jessica said.

After winning local and state speech competition, Jessica was selected to present her speech at the State Farm Show, where she was congratulated by the former Gov. Thomas Ridge.

She said that her parents always motivate 4-H members to give back to the community. Some of the ways they have done this was to plant flowers, paint picnic tables, and pick up trash on the Community Building grounds.

"When you join the Grange, you don't sit and listen. You get involved. Just because you are a youth doesn't mean someone older than you is in charge," Jessica said.

She sees Grange and 4-H activities as developing good skills, especially public speaking skills.

Jessica credits the 4-H motto of "making the best better" as a goal she strives to fulfill. "I always try to give 100 percent to everything I do. I want to present the very best that I can," she said.

Recently that meant making three no-sew blanket projects instead of one for 4-H, and sewing eight shirts for other square dancing club members.

"She's an excellent daughter," her mom said. "I'm really proud of her."



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 National Grange Winner

