*Here she is, Wisconsin’s new Miss America*

**By Bill Barth and Stephanie Klett**

It might be said a community is known by the visitors it attracts and, in that sense, Lake Geneva stands above most.

Get ready to add another jewel to the community crown.

The newest reigning Miss America is coming.

For those who follow the competition, and those who don’t, Grace Stanke began her journey in her hometown, as Miss Wausau Outstanding Teen in 2016. She captured the Miss Wisconsin title in 2022 and represented her state in the national competition, selected Miss America on December 15, 2022.

She is only the third Wisconsin competitor to be named Miss America in the history of the venerable pageant, which began in 1921 in Atlantic City, New Jersey. The other two are Terry Meeuwsen (1973) and Laura Kaeppeler (2012).

Whenever a new Miss America is chosen, tradition requires an official “Homecoming” event to be staged in her state. It’s a big deal. Landing the event is a feather in a community’s cap.

Regular readers know Stephanie Klett’s professional roots go back to her year as Miss Wisconsin 1992, when she competed in the Miss America nationals in Atlantic City. The experience was instrumental in launching Stephanie’s subsequent career path as host of Discover Wisconsin Television and Radio for 20 years, followed by eight years as Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Tourism prior to leading the Visit Lake Geneva organization.

It also kept her connected to the Miss Wisconsin and Miss America programs. So she reached out and pitched for Lake Geneva to host Grace Stanke’s Wisconsin homecoming. In just a few days that effort will culminate with a high-profile visit from the new Miss America and her entourage.

So, who is Grace Stanke?

Just consider:

Ms. Stanke is a senior at UW-Madison. Her major is Nuclear Engineering. She’s a tireless advocate for STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) programs, particularly to encourage girls to step forward into what, traditionally, has been a male-dominated field. She credits her father, a civil engineer, with influencing her chosen field. She also notes that nuclear advances helped save her father’s life when he underwent treatment for Hodgkin’s Lymphoma.

Looking ahead, she intends to join her professional abilities with her fame to advocate for clean nuclear power and its potential for protecting the environment and lessening the risks associated with climate change. Her Miss America platform is called “Clean Energy, Cleaner Future.” Science, she believes, can be the catalyst for overcoming the environmental challenges facing America and the world.

Grace also is a classical violinist. Her performance of “Storm” from the Four Seasons by Vivaldi won the the competitions preliminary talent award.

“Grace Stanke fits the long Miss America tradition of recognizing intelligence, talent and community service,” Stephanie said. “Grace is a force of nature. This past summer Lake Geneva was host to my Miss America Class of 1992 30th reunion, and now we have the honor of hosting Grace’s Homecoming for the state of Wisconsin. We are honored to welcome her.”

Miss America Grace Stanke will be in Lake Geneva February 16-17. Fit for a budding nuclear engineer, she will hold a news conference and tour at Yerkes Observatory. She is scheduled to speak to an all-school assembly at St. Francis de Sales K-8 School. Visit Lake Geneva is hosting a Business After Hours event at the Riviera, where Ms. Stanke will speak and perform.

Celebration on Wells is sponsoring the all-Wisconsin themed event with Wisconsin cheeses, charcuterie boards and Wisconsin’s favorite beverages.

A meet-and-greet open to the public is planned from 9:30-10:30 on Friday morning, February 17, at Inspired Coffee. She is scheduled to speak to Badger High School junior and senior STEM students and will end her tour at Ice Castles. From here, Ms. Stanke will next stop at UW-Madison.

Visitors to the community also will include Morgan Greco, Miss America Outstanding Teen; Robin Fleming, CEO of Miss America and a well-known entrepreneur, dress designer and television producer; along with several “Forever” Miss Wisconsin’s of previous decades and members of the Miss Wisconsin Board of Directors.

“Grace is just amazing and inspirational and we’re so thrilled she’s coming,” Stephanie said. “Let’s give her a big Lake Geneva welcome back to Wisconsin.”

*Bill Barth is the former Editor of the Beloit Daily News, and a member of the Wisconsin Newspaper Hall of Fame. Stephanie Klett is the President and CEO of Visit Lake Geneva, and the former Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Tourism.*