

# Miss America aides get the job perks, problems

ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. (AP) — After Miss America 1999, Nicole Johnson, relinquishes her crown later this month, she gets to go home.

For Bonnie Sirgany the reign never stops. It only pauses long enough for her to catch up on her own personal life before resuming her responsibilities as aide, confidante, road manager, mother and 24-hour adviser to the world-famous beauty queen.

She is one of two women who alternate each month as Miss America's official travel companion.

"It's the best job," said former companion Ellie Taylor, 72, who held the job for 17 years. "You get paid to see the world and go to all these wonderful places and meet all these celebrities. But it's a hectic month. You need a month off to recuperate."

Sirgany — who temporarily gives up her duties to Michele Brennan next month — sometimes logs as many as 20,000 miles a month accompanying Miss America on her year-long national speaking tour.

While Miss America gives speeches, poses for pictures and signs auto-

graphs, Sirgany tips the porters, writes expense reports, runs interference and provides a shoulder to cry on when Miss America gets homesick.

"A lot of tears have been shed on these shoulders," she said. "She gives the speeches, I handle the problems. If someone has to be a bad guy, it has to be the traveling companion: 'I'm sorry, but there will be no more autographs.' She can't say that."

Sirgany will take another winner under her wing Sept. 18, when a new Miss America is crowned. Contestants for the 79th annual pageant begin arriving in Atlantic City today.

Typically, Miss America makes one or two appearances a day, but the travel never ends. In July, Miss Johnson visited 14 states, some twice.

The sponsoring group that requests Miss America's appearance is responsible for providing two first-class airline tickets, a two-bedroom hotel suite, three meals a day for two people and transportation in a vehicle with \$1 million worth of insurance.

Sometimes the accommodations are posh, but not always.

"I've slept everywhere from a \$15,000-a-night suite at the Plaza Hotel in New York to a cardboard box at a college campus in Oskaloosa, Iowa, and everywhere in between," Sirgany said.

After each appearance, Sirgany reports to pageant officials on how Miss America performed and how well she was prepared.

"You worry more about them than you do about your own kids," Sirgany said. "It's somebody else's child, and you're responsible for them 24 hours a day."

Her job has taken her to classrooms, state capitols, amusement parks, homeless shelters, AIDS hospices and juvenile detention centers.

"Once, we were locked on death row with five inmates who killed their husbands," she said.

And the perks? "I've met four presidents: Ford, Carter, Bush and Clinton. And I went to Clinton's inaugural," she said. "I've been to the Super Bowl four times, the World Series once, the Rose Bowl, the Grand Prix, the Belmont Stakes and the American Cup."

# 'Sixth Sense' captures fifth week at the top

LOS ANGELES (AP) — "The Sixth Sense" remained the top box-office draw for the fifth straight week-end with a record-breaking take for the four-day Labor Day weekend.

"The Sixth Sense," starring Bruce Willis, is the tale of a boy who's a magnet for the walking dead. The movie took in \$28.5 million, according to industry estimates Monday.

That's nearly as much as the grosses for the rest of the top five films, which took a combined \$30.1 million.

"I've never really seen a film at this time of year performing so consistently and in such a big way," said Paul Dergarabedian, president of Exhibitor Relations Co. Inc., which tracks the box office. "It's become one of those films like 'Titanic' or 'Phantom Menace' ... that just totally captures the imaginations of movie-goers."

Disney, the film's distributor, again revised its expectations for the film, now up to a minimum final gross of \$250 million.

Only one new movie, the Skeet Ulrich-Cuba Gooding Jr. thriller "Chill Factor," cracked the top 10 this weekend, grossing \$5.7 million for

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PAUL DERGARABEDIAN  
box office tracker

sixth place. "Runaway Bride" was second with \$8.6 million, "The 13th Warrior" was third with \$8.4 million, "Bowfinger" was fourth with \$7 million and "The Thomas Crown Affair" was fifth with \$6.1 million.

It was a fitting end to a record summer movie season. The movie industry did about \$3 billion in business from Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day, topping the previous high of \$2.6 billion in the summer of 1998.

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