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Entertainment

'Oh, the weird diet girl'

Former Miss America joins general and mom on stage to bring awareness to eating disorders.

By Tom Ragan

Two years ago, Kirsten Haglund was on top of the world after being crowned Miss America.

All eyes were on her as she broke into a smile and shook with excitement in front of millions of people watching her on national television.

On Friday, she took her place among a small panel of experts inside the Turnip Rose, a banquet facility in Costa Mesa.

It was quite the contrast to a Miss America pageant. And there was a silence as she approached the podium and talked about her personal battle with anorexia nervosa, which afflicts millions of women today.

"This is not just about statistics and numbers," said Haglund, 21, an Atlanta resident and political science major at Emory University. "It's a disease that's transforming people's lives and families' lives. It's addictive. I got high out of controlling my food intake, and nobody really wanted to hang out with me.

"After a while, I was known around school as 'Oh, the weird diet girl.'"

She said the eating disorder came upon her when she was 12 years old, the result of competitive ballet classes and the preoccupation to look fit while on stage. So she decided to eat very little.

Her parents didn't recognize the problem until she was 15. They quickly took her to a doctor, who diagnosed it and provided her with treatment — and a counselor.

Haglund has since decided to use her celebrity status to draw attention to the problem, which clinical experts say is as prevalent as depression and alcoholism but receives little federal funding — \$28 million a year.

Sleeping disorders receive more federal funds, experts said, adding that in most states a licensed eating disorder facility does not exist. And if they do, they operate under the umbrella of some other treatment facility, like Sober Living by the Sea in Newport Beach, which serves at least a half dozen women who have eating disorders.

Sober Living is run by CRC Health Group, based in Cupertino. The group's Chief Executive Barry Karlin was present at the conference.

So was former White House drug czar and Gen. Barry McCaffrey.

"This is not just a sorority girl's problem, for God's sake," McCaffrey said. "The problem is widespread, and there's a chance you could lose your daughters to cardiac arrest if you don't catch it quick. Anorexia is basically acute starvation. Heart attacks are often the end result when you end up starving yourself."

But to detect the problem, you first have to recognize the symptoms.

McCaffrey urged the audience to watch over their children closely, particularly between sixth grade and 12th grade, when behavioral problems, he said, tend to manifest themselves. Many like to call eating disorders the silent danger or the silent killer, often because the symptoms will go unnoticed — until it's too late.

Haglund's mother, Lora, also spoke at the conference.

"The first thing I thought about was Karen Carpenter," she said, referring to the singer who died of anorexia nervosa in the early 1980s. "You have to learn how to be patient, to question everything and to relearn the way you see things around the household."

As for Kirsten, she's doing fine today.

Her tenure as a pageant queen is behind her and she's using the \$62,000 scholarship to attend Emory University. She said she hopes one day to work as a communications director for a large nonprofit organization that deals with humanitarian causes.

While she was Miss America for a year, between 2008 and 2009, she said she traveled 20,000 miles a month and spoke at countless events.

"There are only six states I haven't been to," she said, adding they are Alaska, Hawaii, North Carolina, Maine, Washington and Oregon.

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