



"I have always loved how Barrington has a small-town feel. Running into friends, teachers, and others at the Jewel-Osco, the Langendorf pool, or any restaurant always makes me feel connected and sentimental to my hometown." -JACEY JOHNSON



Jacey Johnson's

YEAR OF THE CROWN

The Barrington native shares her adventures while wearing every kind of dance shoe on stage, to pageant stilettos, and now, sneakers

Jacey Johnson attended Hough Street School, Station Middle School, and Barrington High School, where she was involved in the PACT Leadership, Snowflake, and Student Council organizations. She pursued dance, including tap, jazz, ballet, pointe, and hip hop for 18 years and truly enjoyed Bataille Academie of the Danse's Integrity Dance Project, where she helped mentor students with special needs. She just completed her first year on the Bataille staff as a teacher and choreographer.

The Illinois State University graduate earned a B.S. in Physical Education and Teaching. While in college, she served as the director of Delight Women's Ministry, was administrative vice president of Gamma Phi Beta Sorority, and became certified as a Service Dog Trainer for Paws Giving Independence. And since last September, Johnson has served as our National American Miss Illinois, wearing her crown with great pride.

EARNING THE CROWN FOR ILLINOIS

Winning National American Miss Illinois was the culmination of years of preparation. Was this your first title?

2024 marks my 10th year participating in pageants. This moment was a dream that 13-year-old me had, and 23-year-old me brought to fruition. Having been with National American Miss since day one in pageantry, and serving as the Miss Illinois Junior Teen in 2016, winning the oldest division was a life-changing moment I will cherish forever.

How did you first get in the pageant world?

I received a letter in the mail in 2014 to attend an open call for National American Miss (NAM) and started my pageant journey. Through the 10 years of competing, I have gained confidence, public speaking skills, and meaningful friendships with women who are trailblazers and change makers.

Do pageants offer good training for young women?

Pageantry creates leaders, innovators, and philanthropists. Pageants require the same skills as sports: dedication, resilience, patience, hard work, and passion. To win the title of National American Miss 2023, I competed in the categories of formal wear, community service, interview, and personal introduction. Every competition is judged on the character of your heart. Women leave competition feeling empowered, strong, and confident, even without a crown.

You were crowned National American Miss Illinois last Labor Day. Tell us about the moment!

This moment culminated through years of serving this organization. The entire weekend of competition I was at peace and enjoyed every second I got to be with my friends and family. As the crowning approached and awards were being handed out, my emotions started to build. They announced the top five and slowly my name hadn't been called yet—meaning I might've won the title. As they announced "National American Miss Illinois 2023 is... Jacey Johnson" I fell to the floor and was crying with happiness that my dream had come true. I was able to take my first walk and wave as my parents rushed to the stage to hug me.

Tell us about NAM and what you like about the organization?

National American Miss is America's #1 pageant for girls and women ages 4-24. The motto is "growing confidence" and that truly is what they do! Girls become a part of what is called "NAMily" because you become family forever.

You are also a certified service dog trainer. How did you get involved with this program and what does it require?

When COVID hit, I was looking for ways to become involved at Illinois State University, having stayed on campus, and found a club named "Indy-Pendence Service Dogs." The club partners with a nonprofit in Peoria, Illinois, Paws Giving Independence. Throughout the process of selection, classes, and testing, I became a service dog trainer. During my time as a trainer, I worked with dogs to help people with different medical needs. I was selected as a puppy raiser, and that puppy is now three and lives with me because he didn't qualify, and Scout is living his best life as a spoiled pet.



GO WHERE YOU'RE NEEDED

Today you are working as an educator, specifically in physical education. Was this your career plan all along?

Until my last semester of college, traditional teaching in a school was not even on my radar as I had other career goals. I went into student teaching hesitantly, but it turned into one of my greatest experiences. I was placed in a Title I school in Bloomington, Illinois, and within three weeks knew I couldn't give up teaching. I began applying to work in Title I schools closer to home, and that is how I found my job teaching 6-8 grade physical education. I just completed my first year. I am also grateful that I can still chase my dreams of teaching dance in the evenings and on weekends!

Why did you decide to work in this community?

I am grateful for the education, opportunities, and skill set that Barrington 220 and my parents provided me. Unfortunately, not every student has the opportunities that I was afforded. It is disheartening that students living just 40 minutes from Barrington don't have what I did.

What does your day-to-day look like at work?

I walk into the building and greet my students as they eat breakfast, and have quick conversations before we start the day. I teach multiple classes per day, and we focus on sports education, building healthy habits, and having fun. I substitute for classes in my open periods and tutor students during my free time. The day ends with me saying goodbye to all my students as they exit the building.

What is your strategy for being a successful educator with your students?

I focus on building relationships with my students. Learning about their

lives, families, and interests makes our time in class together more productive, because it creates a positive rapport. I strive to be a safe space for my students to turn to for anything they need. I am always excited to receive invites to their sporting events and band concerts! I am so grateful to have had a wonderful mentor teacher guiding me through the year and always appreciated her insight, advice, and feedback.

Do students in your school have the same problems and concerns as students in our community?

When we look at what makes us similar instead of what's different—that's when change begins. Kids across America, no matter the community, are facing challenges involving social media, peer pressure, substance abuse, and mental health. Kids seem to be growing up faster these days, missing their childhood, and I hope we can try to create happy and healthy people through education, support, and open conversation.

What have your students taught you?

My students have taught me how much I can love others. I didn't expect in such a short time to care about more than 600 kids. I always make my best effort to attend school events, their extracurricular sporting games, and going to school every day. I once had a student tell me, "I am glad you come to school, it's why I came today," and I think of that statement every day.

LETTERS TO MY YOUNGER SELF

What do you think are the greatest challenges young people face today?

Groupthink is a challenge facing young people today. Influence from social media, trends, and exclusivity can cause people to conform to others. Individuality is what makes the world go 'round because we need people with different passions, opinions, and callings. I hope young people can feel empowered to figure out who they are for themselves, stay true to that person, and find the people who support them and help them grow.

You've crossed the great divide from child to adult, student to teacher.

Looking back, what advice would you give your younger self?

You will never regret doing the right thing. Helping others, standing up, or making a difference will always matter and although sometimes it isn't comfortable, it truly is how you grow as a person. Stay true to your beliefs, goals, and values, and the right people will surround you!

What should parents know to better understand their school-age children?

Letting them have a misstep and more importantly giving them the tools to recover when things don't go as they expected. Disappointment is a part of life and teaching children how to be resilient, understanding, and celebratory for others is an important lesson to learn. Every time my name hasn't been called to win a crown, or my dance solo didn't place, or I had a tough time—those are the moments that created me. How you respond in those situations says more about your character than the moments you succeed.

Looking back on the significant investment you and your parents made to enable your pageant competitions, would you do it all over again?

You can't put a price on learning life and leadership skills. Every opportunity from the interview room to the stage shaped me into the woman I am today. Interviewing for jobs, securing leadership roles, and remaining servant-hearted stems from my parents and pageantry's influence.

Where the Apple Falls *by Jacey Johnson*




Dee Dee and Jacey Johnson

BRUCE JOHNSON “DAD”

My dad, Bruce Johnson, is the CEO of Nicasa Behavioral Health Services. He is a retired police chief, United States Marine Corps veteran, and teaches classes at Harper Community College. My dad founded Mano a Mano in Round Lake Park, a 501(c)3 nonprofit, helping immigrants become involved members in their community.

My dad, also known as my biggest cheerleader, has instilled in me the importance of serving others. My dad spends every day trying to improve people's lives and the communities he works in. He is persistent in his efforts to make a difference and has taught me the true meaning of being philanthropic. He teaches me to see the best in people and to laugh plenty while chasing my dreams, and he encourages every crazy dream I have. He is the ultimate dad, having been my soccer coach, pageant gown escort, and dance dad. He never misses a moment.

BROTHERS JOEY AND JOHN

My brother Joey Gallagher is a principal of a school in Boston alongside my sister-in-law, Maggie, who works in education consulting. Their daughter, Nora June, is my beloved niece. My brother John Gallagher and his wife, Paris, live abroad. He works in the public sector and she runs her own communications firm. I look up to my brothers and sisters-in-law with admiration for their drive and passion. 

DEE DEE JOHNSON “MOM”

My mom, Dee Dee Johnson, has been a part of the Barrington community since 1969 as a dancer and now owner of Bataille Academie of the Danse. She just celebrated 55 years of our dance studio. My mom has served as the Barrington Area United Way President and is currently a co-chair on the Barrington Cultural Commission and member of Barrington Chamber of Commerce.

My mom, also known as my “momager,” has taught me how to empower others. She has about 300 students in her dance studio and has had thousands of students in her years teaching, meaning she has influenced many young people in our community. She teaches her dancers (and me) discipline, determination, and passion. Not many people love their job every day for 38 years, and she has no plans of slowing down. Her drive and messages inspire me—that hard work and a love for what you do can better people and the community and yourself. My mom is at every dress fitting, acts as my paparazzi, and celebrates all my wins on and off the stage.



Jacey and Bruce Johnson