

Roe to serve as Festival Honoree

BY DANNY WADE

A former beauty queen and Humboldt royalty will add another jewel in her crown. Mary Key Roe will serve as honoree of the 81st annual West Tennessee Strawberry Festival this May.

Festival president, Melissa Swingler, and general chairman, Chelsea Caraway, proudly selected Roe as honoree and recently announced their choice.

Roe wore the crown of Hostess Princess in 1972, the last year the Territorial pageant was held outdoors at the Horse Show arena on Elliott St. Now as honoree she is following in her father's footsteps. Parker Williams was festival honoree in 1998.

"I kind of knew last year, working with Ashley (Culpepper, her brother who was president), who my honoree would be," Swingler said. "You think, 'who represents the Strawberry Festival'. Her name popped into my head. When I think of the Strawberry Festival, you can't help but think of Mary Key. She's Humboldt!"

"Melissa asked me who I was thinking about as honoree," Caraway said of some of their earlier conversations. "I said Mary Key. She (Swingler) said, 'that's who I was thinking of too'."

The process of asking Roe to be honoree was an awkward conversation.

"She works the graveyard shift," Swingler explained. "I texted her and said can you call me? I need to talk to you about Strawberry Festival. Mary Key immediately said, 'What can I do for you?' I said you don't have to do anything, just be honoree!"

"The lady working next to me (at Jackson-Madison County General Hospital where Roe works) thought something was wrong," Roe chuckled. "I immediately started crying. I assured her I was fine."

Mary Key accepted the invitation to be honoree right then and there over the phone.

Roe has been involved with the Strawberry Festival her entire life. "Growing up, I never remember a time I wasn't part of the Strawberry Festival," Roe said. "My parents built floats for my brothers and me and I also occasionally marched with the Scouts or with Rita Wilson's baton group. I rode floats until I was in junior high."

She participated in the Strawberry Festival at a young age as a flower girl. A little later, Roe competed in the Jr. Hostess Princess Revue as a youngster and in the Hostess Princess Revue twice, winning her senior year in high school.

"Santa brought me the winning dress," Roe recalled. "I got up early and saw the dress. I was so excited that I couldn't go back to sleep after that!"

Even though she was crowned Hostess Princess, Roe said she wasn't your typical pageant girl. Her only other pageant was competing for Miss Knoxville, which was a preliminary for Miss Tennessee. In Knoxville, she was a finalist and chosen Miss Congeniality by her fellow contestants.

But her mother was always involved in local pageants as a member of the Territorial Revue Committee.

"I was her helper while I was in junior high and high school," Roe said. "We would work on

numbers and decorations at home."

After college and moving back to Humboldt, Roe continued to be involved with the festival. She stayed on to help the Territorial Committee with her mother. Years later, Roe became committee chair and still holds the position.

"Born during the Strawberry Festival, we made sure Grey (Barker, her older son) was a Festival parade participant beginning just after his second birthday. Bill and I began to build floats for him to ride from the time he was seven," Roe said. "Mary Elizabeth (her daughter) came along several years later and though Grey thought he had outgrown float riding, he rode one last time so that they could ride together on just one float."

Her younger son, Will Parker Roe, also rode on floats with his sister and competed in the Junior Host and Hostess Revue, twice winning a place as Page. He had earlier won the title of Little Mr. Humboldt.

After Grey aged out of riding floats, Mary Key and husband Bill, built floats with different groups of parents for their younger two children. A few families would get together to build these floats each year, just as the earlier float building group had done. One of those families was Mike and Lujana DeBerry, general chairman Caraway's parents. Mary Elizabeth and Chelsea were close to the same age and rode many floats together.

Bill and Mary Key have always been hospitable, opening up their home to hundreds festival guests over the years.

"At the time we lived on Main Street in my grandmother's house, where my father grew up," Roe added. "The night before the parades, I was always so excited that I would get up at 4 a.m. to sweep off the sidewalks. This was before parade placement was assigned by registration, and our men would pull the float at 3 a.m. to get in line. They stayed with the floats all night."

Over the years, Roe has served on



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