

CROWD PLEASER



BY CHRISTINE MCBURNEY



MAN'S JOB: CONTESTANTS LEFT THEIR INHIBITIONS AT THE DOOR FOR THE CONTEST, WHICH INCLUDED WAYNE MILLER SERENADING HIS MOTHER (LEFT) AND BILL DARNIEDER WINNING IT ALL (TOP).

IT WAS A WILD GOOD TIME AT THIS YEAR'S MR. CWRU CONTEST, AN ANNUAL EVENT WITH PAGEANTRY ALL ITS OWN.

On a Saturday night in November, a different kind of chemistry took place in Schmitt Lecture Hall. The auditorium, where students more typically gather for science courses, was the site of the Sigma Psi sorority's yearly fund-raiser: the 22nd Annual Mr. CWRU Contest.

Similar to a beauty pageant, the competition is judged by a panel of faculty members and Sigma Psi pledges. This creative, at times raucous, but ultimately charitable event had special meaning for the sisters this year. The \$1,700 they raised through ticket sales, concessions, and raffle tickets was donated to the Children's Miracle Network in memory of Cristina Camardo, a senior and student leader who died suddenly and unexpectedly of a liver ailment in September.

Outside the hall, before the festivities began, two of the judges, mathematics lecturer Christopher Butler (CIT '83; GRS '85, mathematics) and Assistant Professor of Chemistry Ignacio Ocasio (a k a "Doc Oc"), waited while the packed house of 370 people settled in. Mr. Butler glanced around, cautiously. "I don't want to look at contestants," he said. "It's like seeing the bride before the wedding." Doc Oc, who has judged the event since the 1980s, said it's always good to see the students lose their inhibitions. "Without alcohol," he added.

Behind the scenes, stage manager Joanna Baughman of Sigma Psi checked in with the contestants, who were completing their hair-gel routines. Contestant Alex Rifman, a senior, was practical. "Mr. CWRU," he pointed out, "is the only place you can see ten naked guys for five dollars."

The lecture hall was transformed into the theater of the absurd. Under the glare of fluorescent lighting and against a backdrop of blue chairs and giant green chalkboards, most of the audience was dressed casually while a swirl of sorority sisters buzzed about in little black numbers. The DJs, Phi Kappa Psi members Paul Sheldon and Premal Patel, blasted Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" and then segued into a Pearl Jam tune. Closer to the stage, freshman Sigma Psi pledge and judge Ana Radovic explained the high-tech way she got her job: "Whoever e-mailed the sisters the fastest got to be a judge."

Around 7 p.m., emcee and Sigma Psi president Erina Alvares, a junior, got the show underway. In the category of representative costumes, junior Asim Haque paid tribute to "Leon Phelps, the Ladies Man," the Tim Meadows character from *Saturday Night Live* and, last year, a feature film. With his giant Afro wig and polyester pants, Mr. Haque collected phone numbers from the audience while grooving to James Brown. In the beach-wear segment, senior Doug Oesterlin ran down the aisle to the stage wearing a snorkel, nose plug, T-shirt, and shorts.

In the formal-wear portion of the contest, Sigma Psi sisters escorted the men to the stage. Senior Rob Becker was stunning in a simple yet graceful burgundy gown and heels. Not to be outdone, junior T. J. Salerno asked his escort, fellow junior Wendy Adkins, to wear his letters. She accepted and a collective "ah" resounded throughout the hall.


The talent section was by far the most competitive and interactive. Wrapped in a toga, freshman Ben Hillman struggled with Beethoven's "Für Elise" on the piano. Quitting, he disrobed to reveal a fuchsia tutu, in which he danced around the stage like a ballerina, kicking and breaking faux wooden planks held by stagehands.

Freshman Wayne Miller invited his mother onstage and serenaded her karaoke style with "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life," the sardonic song from the Monty Python film *Life of Brian*. When junior Nathan Brown's writing out of an entire computer program on the chalkboard went on too long, the DJs got into the act, too, underscoring his "routine" with Lynyrd Skynyrd's notoriously lengthy opus, "Free Bird."

Meanwhile, the audience got into the act by doing an impromptu wave.

The audience was the ultimate judge of the evening. When senior Bill Darnieder solved a Rubik's Cube in less than two minutes, everyone knew immediately that he had clinched the Mr. CWRU title. Mr. Darnieder was so focused that his body began moving to the rhythm of the chanting crowd and cranked music as he twisted and turned the colored squares. When he finished, doing the last couple of seconds with his eyes closed and then tossing the cube to the judges, the crowd jumped to its feet in a spontaneous standing ovation.

Before the winner was announced, some other prizes were awarded. The contestants themselves nominated each other and voted Doug Oesterlin Mr. Congeniality; T. J. Salerno, Mr. Photogenic; Bill Darnieder, Mr. Macho. Then came the runners-up for Mr. CWRU: Wayne Miller in third place, and T. J. Salerno, first runner-up.

When Bill Darnieder was named the new Mr. CWRU, the Sigma Psi sisters crowned him, handed him a bouquet of roses, and placed a bright red sash around him. Clearly moved, Mr. CWRU was all smiles as he passed out his roses to the Sigma Psi sisters. Asked how he felt about winning the title, Mr. Darnieder said, "I didn't think I'd win. I'm not popular. I'm not really a jock. It's been a lot of fun." 

A regular contributor to CWRU Magazine, Christine McBurney believes that brains and heart are what it's all about.



AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION: AT THE MR. CWRU CONTEST, THEY LAUGHED, THEY CHEERED, THEY DID THE WAVE.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBERT MULLER. FOR MORE PHOTOS OF THE EVENT, VISIT THE MAGAZINE'S WEB SITE AT WWW.CWRU.EDU/PUBS/CWRUMAG.