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Personal Journeys

## **Beauty and the beast**

**The quest for perfection leads Miss Georgia down a path of self-destruction**



Joe Paull / The Ledger Enquirer

Leighton Jordan places her right hand on her pounding heart. Chills blanket her body. Throngs of people jump to their feet in applause.

She points up to God and promises herself to relish every day of being Miss Georgia.

All 365 days, she tells herself as she floats across the stage of the performing arts center in Columbus, wearing a glittering tiara and a mega-watt smile.

Everything goes according to plan at first. Pretty and poised, Leighton treks to small town festivals, children's hospitals, ribbon-cuttings. In honor of her special-needs brother, she selects Sibling Support Project as her platform.

All the while, the tall, 19 year old with pale blue eyes and long brunette hair carefully conceals a secret — a secret she's kept for seven years.

Just three months into her reign, Leighton is in trouble.

She returns home from a string of public appearances one fall afternoon and sits on her bed, suitcase unpacked, feeling overcome with sadness and shame.

Her mother, Clemmie Jordan, enters the room. She's not accustomed to seeing her normally effervescent daughter look so glum.

Are you OK? Jordan asks.

No mom, I am not, said Leighton, who starts to cry. I need help.

Over the course of the next several months, Leighton would log more than 30,000 miles around the state, making more than 100 public appearances as Miss Georgia. But between appearances, she would travel a short distance from her family's home in Suwanee to a nondescript brick building in Dunwoody. There, she wasn't the face of Miss Georgia. She was simply a young woman struggling to break free from the grip of anorexia and bulimia, which had taken hold of her since she was 12 years old.

### **Quest for perfection**

Born 21 months apart, Leighton and her older brother, Robin, were inseparable as children. They played video games together and worked on puzzles side-by-side. To Leighton, it didn't matter that Robin was deaf and born with cerebral palsy. Leighton learned sign language and used it to read books to Robin before bedtime.

But Leighton couldn't control how others treated Robin. When Leighton was about 5, she started receiving invitations to birthday parties. Robin was rarely invited. He would watch his mother and Leighton head to the car with a gift-wrapped present in hand and tearfully sign, "I want to go."

“Oh, the look on her face,” recalls Leighton’s mother with a sigh. “That’s not a good memory.”

After that, Leighton started skipping birthday parties that didn’t include Robin. And she began to compensate for the challenges and stresses her parents experienced caring for a special needs child.

“I wanted to be that perfect child for my parents. I never wanted to cause my parents any trouble,” she said. “It wasn’t anything they said to me. It was just how I internalized it.”

During a parent-teacher meeting, Leighton’s second-grade teacher praised Leighton with a string of accolades — she was sweet and doing exceptionally well in school. But then she paused. *There is a bit of a problem*, she said. *Leighton is a perfectionist.*

Her parents had already noticed.

“If Leighton got a 93 or 95, she wasn’t happy,” said Jordan. “She wasn’t happy unless it was a 100.”

That all-or-nothing approach spilled over into Leighton’s childhood passion: dancing. She started early and trained relentlessly. Even at 3 years old, Leighton could effortlessly “turn out” or rotate her hips. She had that extra something, a natural ability.

By 12, Leighton was enrolled in a preprofessional ballet school. She was home schooled and training six hours a day, six days a week.

“My perfectionist tendencies kicked in and that turned into ‘How can I get better?’” said Leighton. “And part of that was wanting the perfect ballet body.”

It started out innocently — drinking more water, eating more fruits and vegetables.

“I remember thinking, ‘She’s into healthy eating. This is great.’ I was all for it,” recalls her mom.

But no matter how long Leighton rehearsed, no matter how hard she pushed herself to perform more turns, higher jumps, faster footwork, she could not achieve her impossible goal of perfection. And that made her feel out of control. But there was one thing she could control she soon discovered: her diet.

At first, Leighton fixated on eating only at precise times of the day. Breakfast at 9 a.m. before ballet; lunch between 1 and 2 p.m.; dinner at 9 p.m. She’d get anxious if she got off schedule, refusing to eat at other times of the day. Her weight plummeted, but her dancing career took off. At 14, Leighton participated in a summer dance intensive with the Washington Ballet in D.C. Although she was one of the youngest dancers there, she landed lead parts. That was the first time she threw out her lunch. Food was no longer

nourishment, a way to fuel the body. Food was an instrument for controlling feelings and pressure that seemed overwhelming. She began starving herself.

After returning home, Leighton disguised her refusal to eat. She leapt out of bed early and insisted she ate before anyone else. She nibbled a few bites of dinner at night, spreading the food around on a dessert plate. In addition to growing thin, her body began to break down. She stopped menstruating. Her thick hair started falling out. She lost the ability to maintain body temperature and she was always cold. She was also so weak, she'd sometimes faint.

With her rapid weight loss becoming increasingly obvious, her dance instructors at the Metropolitan Ballet Theatre in Alpharetta noticed her shrinking frame, her sunken eyes. They gave her an ultimatum: Gain some weight or she would be dropped from the upcoming production of "The Nutcracker."

Jordan set up a doctor's appointment for her daughter. A former professional dancer, Jordan had seen waif-thin dancers. This was something else.

Leighton was put on appetite stimulants, three pills a day. Initially, the pills made her ravenous and seemed to do the trick. She couldn't fight the urge to eat, and her weight crept upward. But her cravings became so overpowering, one day she devoured two generous-sized slices of chocolate cake. She had a dance intensive with the San Francisco Ballet coming up, and she panicked.

"I remember thinking, 'I can't gain weight, I can't gain weight!'"

For the first time, she put her finger in her mouth and tried to force herself to vomit — nothing happened. So she grabbed her sneakers. With tears streaming down her face, she ran mile after mile. She kept going, trying to burn off the calories from the cake. When she returned home, she changed into pink tights and a leotard and went to a three-hour ballet class. She skipped dinner that night.

"This was the beginning of my battle with bulimia," she said.

Before long, Leighton, regularly stuck her finger down her throat.

Her mother admits she was caught up in the excitement of her daughter being a ballet prodigy, and she didn't realize how serious her struggle with food had become.

And once again, as Leighton's weight reached perilously low numbers (she won't reveal how low), her career soared. She was just 15 when she was invited to join the Houston Ballet's second company. Leaving her family behind, she moved to Texas where she shared a townhouse with other teenage dancers and an adult chaperone. While she was there, she was also invited to compete in the International Beijing Ballet Competition. She was the only American who made it to the finals.

Leighton danced with the Houston company for two years, but her time there was plagued with injuries and surgeries, including one on each ankle. After her last surgery, she decided she had no choice but to give up ballet. She was devastated.

Leighton returned home and started taking classes at Georgia Perimeter College. One day on a whim, she went with a friend to a children's beauty pageant.

“Something about it clicked,” said Leighton. “I told my mom, I think I want to do this.”

Not long after her 18th birthday, she competed in her first pageant, Miss Georgia Teen USA, and made it to the top 15. Several more pageants followed, including a run at Miss Georgia 2011, which landed her in the top 12. The following summer she was named Miss Georgia, and she was on her way to the Miss America pageant.

In retrospect, competing in beauty pageants might not have been the best choice for someone suffering from anorexia and bulimia. But ultimately it is what led Leighton to confront her eating disorder, which had taken over her life. She was now turning to every possible method to deprive and empty her body of calories, taking laxatives and exercising to the point of exhaustion.

### **Hunger for beauty**

At the beginning of her reign as Miss Georgia, Leighton convinced herself she had a handle on her eating disorder.

It wasn't easy or pleasant, but it allowed her to have the body she wanted. Psychologically, the cycle of bingeing and purging dulled painful emotions and provided a false sense of control.

In some ways, eating disorders are like other addictions. Just as an alcoholic needs more and more alcohol to achieve the same high, a woman who starves herself or purges will need to ratchet it up for the same desired effects.

The body doesn't give in easily to someone trying to be unnaturally thin. It adjusts to reduced calories by lowering the metabolism; it responds to purging by more quickly absorbing food.

Every day, Leighton started out with one objective: Eat as little as possible. Often that meant limiting her diet to what she considered “safe” foods — apples, egg whites, grilled chicken, raw spinach.

Some days that would mean as little as egg whites, chicken and apple slices — equaling just a few hundred calories, far below the nearly 2,000 calories a woman her size needs to maintain a healthy weight.

And sometimes she forced herself to vomit.

“I felt so trapped,” said Leighton. “As much as I wanted a ‘normal’ relationship with food, and as much as I tried to have one, I couldn’t.”

The eating disorder began to ravage her body. She had a chronic sore throat. Her muscles ached. Some nights she lay in bed reeling in pain and unable to sleep.

Last September, Leighton googled “eating disorders” and found the Atlanta Center for Eating Disorders in Dunwoody.

### **Competition vs. recovery**

Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness, including depression, according to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders.

It is estimated that half of those who suffer from anorexia or bulimia make a full recovery. About 30 percent make a partial recovery and 20 percent remain chronically ill. About 20 percent of people suffering from anorexia will die prematurely from complications related to their eating disorder, including suicide and heart problems.

People with eating disorders don’t always look as skeletal as the stereotype might suggest. As Miss Georgia, Leighton looked thin but healthy. She appeared strong with long, shiny hair and a bright smile. But that public face was in sharp contrast to the demons at war within her.

Dr. Linda Buchanan, a licensed psychologist and director of the Atlanta Center for Eating Disorders in Dunwoody, recommended Leighton enroll in an all-day, partial hospitalization program. Leighton resisted. The Miss America pageant was just a few months away. She needed to prepare for competition. She agreed to attend weekly therapy, and she tried to eat better, but she also felt pressure.

“I didn’t want to let Georgia down,” she said.

The lead up to the pageant was hectic but thrilling. Her days were filled with early morning workouts with a trainer, mock interviews, public appearances and rehearsals for the talent competition portion of the pageant. She planned to perform a Spanish-style classical ballet number to the Cuban standard “Malaguena.”

And twice a week, she headed to therapy sessions at the Atlanta Center for Eating Disorders.

Once she got to Las Vegas, she reveled in the Miss America pageant experience and bonded with other contestants, especially Miss New York Mallory Hagan, who won the Miss America crown. When asked, Leighton says she wasn’t disappointed by the pageant’s outcome, but afterward she was exhausted and melancholy.

“We were *really* looking forward to the pageant being over,” said Buchanan.

Last January, about a week after the Miss America competition, Leighton enrolled in a partial hospitalization program for two months. She arrived every weekday at noon, wearing flowy, comfortable clothes and no makeup, in stark contrast to her public persona. She started the day with a relaxation class. She attended group therapy sessions where she talked about everything from body acceptance to coping mechanisms to mindful eating. She met with a dietitian once a week and had private therapy twice a week.

“It was literally a minute by minute battle,” she said.

Over time, Leighton, now 20, learned to distract herself from the urge to binge or purge by journaling or by getting up and walking around, talking to a friend, listening to music. Sometimes, it was simply a matter of setting a timer for five minutes and letting the urge pass. She took up painting acrylics. She leaned on her faith.

Leighton needed to learn it was OK not to be perfect. She didn’t need to accomplish more and more. She was good enough.

During that time of intensive treatment, Leighton still made Miss Georgia appearances at parades, ribbon-cuttings and children’s hospitals. It was at just such an event, in a town famous for fruitcake, that she would make a turning point in her journey to recovery.

### **Helping others**

Wearing a long black dress, rhinestone earrings and high heels, Leighton beamed at the annual rattlesnake roundup in Claxton last March.

Leighton spotted a teenage girl in the crowd of a meet-and-greet who looked severely underweight and jittery around the platters of pastries. Leighton recognized something in the girl, and she prayed: *God, if I talk to this little girl, I don’t want this to be about me.*

She approached the girl. Her name was Ivey Rowland and she lived in Wrightsville. She was 13, petite and frail with thinning brown hair. Leighton took the girl’s hand.

*I think you would benefit from learning about my story, she said. I am not this perfect person.*

Ivey started crying.

*How did you know?* she asked.

*I have a heart for it,* said Leighton.

Leighton encouraged Ivey to stop weighing herself, and she encouraged her to seek professional help.

Kelli Durden, Ivey's mother, said the meeting with Leighton was a critical moment for her daughter. Ivey realized she was entering dangerous territory and needed to change her relationship with food.

"People would talk about Ivey and how bad she looked and that would only make things worse," said Durden. "But Leighton shared words of encouragement. She was warm and caring. It made all the difference."

That encounter led Leighton to go public with her struggle. She contacted The Miss Georgia Board of Trustees to get the organization's approval.

Initially Gregory Blazer, vice president of the board of trustees, was concerned. He was afraid she would be the target for snarky comments and cheap shots from the public.

"But then I talked to people I know and trust, and they persuaded me to let my guard down. And they have been proven right," he said.

Buchanan also had reservations. She recommended Leighton go slow.

Leighton decided to share her secret with people she was close to before the story hit the newsstands.

One of the first people she called was the reigning Miss America, Mallory Hagan.

### **New measure of success**

From the moment Leighton started therapy last fall, she thought about getting rid of her scale. Her dietitian gave her a slip of paper with 10 ways to destroy it — everything from shredding it piece by piece to taking it to a shooting range. Leighton decided to go at it with an ax.

She called up a friend and went over to her house with the scale and paint pens. She prepared the scale for its eventual fate by first scrawling across the top: "I want my life back" and "No more. I hate you."

She lifted up her friend's ax and — slam! A couple of plastic pieces on the back snapped off. So she whacked the scale again and again.

She recalls bursting into laughter as the scale broke into pieces with wires dangling. It was a goner. She felt triumphant.

"It was very freeing," said Leighton.

For the next six weeks, she experienced no binging, no vomiting, no laxatives. She didn't obsess about calories, but instead nourished her body with a well-rounded diet — dairy, carbohydrates, protein, fruits and vegetables.

"This is what freedom feels like," Leighton thought to herself.



But the Miss Georgia 2013 pageant was looming. Leighton would be back in pageant mode as she passed the crown to her successor. She was anxious about what people might say about her appearance. She knew she was much healthier but also heavier than when she won the crown.

The stress triggered a setback, but since then she has had far more good days than bad ones. She continues to go to therapy sessions twice a week, focusing on relapse prevention. She no longer owns a scale. Leighton and her treatment team feel confident she is nearing the end of recovery. What was dominating her life is now a “small voice,” she said.

This month Leighton heads to the University of Alabama-Huntsville on a full scholarship. She plans to become a pediatric oncology nurse.

On a recent afternoon, Leighton sits in her kitchen, a silver cross ring glinting on her finger as she slowly eats two toasted waffles with peanut butter and an omelette. Her brother, Robin, walks over and kisses her forehead.

“I love you” he signs. Leighton signs it back to him.

When she’s done eating, she logs onto the computer. Since March, more than a dozen teenage girls have contacted her via Facebook telling her they have sought therapy for eating disorders because of her.

And Ivey, the girl she met at the rattlesnake roundup, messaged her: “I know you have impacted many lives, mine being one, but you also saved my life and I will always be grateful for that.”

Then Leighton logs onto the new blog she started about her recovery process. Its name is “Imperfectly Perfect.”

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## **HOW WE GOT THE STORY**

Helena Oliviero often reports on health issues for the AJC. When the reigning Miss Georgia 2012, Leighton Jordan, made public her struggle with eating disorders, Oliviero thought her story would make a compelling Personal Journey. Oliviero was challenged at times to get the former beauty queen to open up about some of her deeply personal experiences. But by gaining Leighton’s trust and applying her skills of gentle persuasion, Oliviero managed to get Leighton to reveal some of the realities of the disorder, which serve as an arresting cautionary tale in an otherwise inspiring story of triumph.



Joe Paul / The Ledger Enquirer

*After Leighton ended her dance career, she turned her talents toward pageants. In 2011, she was among the top 12 in the Miss Georgia pageant. Here, in 2012, she wins the crown.*



Phil Skinner

*Leighton has a session with Dr. Angela Schaffner at Atlanta Center for Eating Disorders. Leighton had to realize her eating disorder was not a small problem. "I thought I wasn't sick enough," she said. "I didn't look like I was going to die."*



Phil Skinner

*Robin Jordan (left), Leighton, Ashton and their mother, Clemmie, play with their dog, Chip, at their Suwanee home.*





Contributed photo

*Leighton's busted scale is now on display at The Atlanta Center for Eating Disorders to inspire others struggling with the illness.*



Phil Skinner

*Leighton Jordan managed to keep her eating disorder secret for seven years. It wasn't until after she was crowned Miss Georgia in 2012 that Leighton's illness became so severe that she sought treatment.*



Contributed photo

*A dance prodigy, Leighton joined the Houston Ballet's second company when she was just 15. She had to leave after two years.*