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17-YEAR-OLD PART OF CAMPAIGN AGAINST STORES THAT SELL TOBACCO TO MINORS

By Kim Vo

Here's a glance at Ashley Hu's April calendar: Wear a cheongsam and perform a peacock dance one night, then fly to New Jersey 10 days later to scold tobacco company stockholders about the prevalence of smoking in Hollywood movies.

Welcome to the worlds of Ashley Hu, where competing in the Miss Teen Chinatown pageant and being a social activist can co-exist, the same way one can be called both Ashley and Xiaoyun in the same home.

The fast-talking teenager takes the roles in stride. Ever since age 10, when the track runner and violinist swapped the Shanghai suburbs for the San Mateo ones, life hasn't fit into tidy categories.

But once in a while interests intersect. Though the slender, clean-scrubbed teen is among 23 contestants for Saturday's 17 pageant in San Francisco, Ashley readily admits that "winning is not that big a deal." Yes, she would like the \$2,000 scholarship prize, but she is more interested in being the pageant's Miss Charity. "I think that title is more meaningful," she said.

History of social work

At 17 - 18 next month she offers - the San Mateo High School senior already has a history of social work, including trying to buy cigarettes as part of a youth club sting operation. It began about three years ago, when she attended a school club meeting where they discussed youth empowerment and tobacco.

"I knew tobacco had health problems, but they said it was a social justice issue how they target Third World countries," Ashley said. Growing up outside Shanghai, she saw it everywhere. "Smoking, I thought it was normal. Everybody smoked in my neighborhood - at home, at restaurants."

Her paternal grandfather had died of lung cancer. Her father still smokes. In their native China, photos of a cowboy loomed from newspapers, magazines and billboards, said Ashley, who had "thought America was like the Marlboro Man."

Some of Ashley's classmates smoked too and were occasionally fined. The social group she belongs to - Youth Organizing San Mateo County, commonly referred to as YO Mateo - decided to organize stings to catch shopkeepers who were selling cigarettes to minors.

"She is smart and articulate and analytical and fearless," said Maureen Sedonaen, president of Youth Leadership Institute, which counts YO Mateo among its programs. Sedonaen said she was proud that Ashley decided to enter a beauty pageant. "I think that sometimes can seem unpopular or not politic."

Ashley herself went to about 30 stores in San Mateo. Throughout the sting, teenagers discovered they could buy cigarettes about a third of the time.

"When my 13-year-old brother did it - crazy - he got some, too," she said.

Bolstered with statistics, the group persuaded San Mateo County last summer to raise the permit fees for selling tobacco from \$25 every five years to \$35 a year and make it easier to suspend those selling privileges if the retailer broke any laws.

Later this month, Ashley will speak at the stockholder meeting of Altria -- the company that owns Philip Morris, home of the Marlboro Man. Members of her youth group purchased shares so that they could attend.

Ashley's activism makes her parents nervous, though. They told her: " 'You don't do this kind of thing in China. You'll get arrested.' I had to convince them. Myself, too," Ashley said. "But this is why my mom came to America."

The Hu family had lived outside Shanghai. Peili Hu was a tailor before she became a homemaker, and Cheng Hu was an ironworker. Back then, the family was so poor they didn't have an indoor toilet and had to grow their own bok choy, melons and rice to eat.

Mother took children

Her parents later separated and Peili Hu decided to take her children to America, where her own parents had moved.

Ashley remembers stepping off the plane April 8, 1995, at San Francisco International Airport. "Everything was so bright," she said. There were "concrete floors. I had never seen that much white skin."

Her aunt immediately changed her name from Xiaoyun to Ashley. "I didn't know what it means," she said. "I couldn't even pronounce it." She entered fourth grade not speaking or understanding English but by eighth grade, with the prodding of a teacher, she entered mainstream classes.

She was nervous about leaving the security of her language-learner English classes, but her teacher told her, " 'This is America.' She taught me to stand up for myself, believe in myself." This spring, Ashley was accepted into the University of California-San Diego, where she plans to study public policy.

She is excited to be the first in her family to attend college, and there are other pluses: "It's a beach place."

Her father, she said, wanted her to get married instead. Her mother leaned toward college. "Get a good education first and then you can get a good man," Peili Hu said. If she only looks good, she said, "it doesn't help her future."

Hesitant title-seeker

With so many activities - tobacco fighting, college preparation, work in dental office and attending a youth leadership conference last week - Ashley was hesitant when her boss suggested she try out for the Miss Teen Chinatown pageant.

"Beauty pageant sounded - I don't know. I'm not that kind of person," she said.

But her mother was excited, and Ashley reconsidered.

Peili Hu, who is a health care worker, remembers her initial reaction differently. " 'Oh, Ashley, our family does not have enough money for you.' But she told me: 'Mommy, don't worry.'"

They sent Ashley's measurements to China for a seamstress there to sew the cheongsam, the long traditional Chinese banner gown. Peili Hu paid a dance instructor to help Ashley choreograph a peacock dance, which Ashley had learned as a child in China but hadn't performed since. And, recently, the family went to Macy's to buy Ashley a Western gown. They charged it.