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## EIU Alumna Achieves Dream of Becoming a Contestant on "Survivor"

Feb-09-2009

"Survivor: Tocantins" contestant Debra (Staton) Beebe was forced to lie to her employers -- the Auburn (Ala.) Board of Education.

"They were led to believe I was going to take leave without pay in order to visit other countries to examine their school systems," Beebe said. "Luckily, (the board members) trust me. They thought I was out to change the world."

And why wouldn't they? Beebe, a 1985 graduate of Eastern Illinois University, had been employed in the Auburn school district for 16 years, working her way from junior high physical education teacher to principal of J.F. Drake Middle School. In addition, she was named Alabama's 2007-2008 middle school principal of the year by the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

There was absolutely no reason for board members to suspect that their valued employee was, in reality, competing against 15 other individuals in Brazil for the title of "Sole Survivor."

"I had no choice," Beebe said about her lie. "We were forbidden to tell anyone."

So how did the board react when they found out the truth?

"They laughed. They know me, and they know I'm a little out there. And that means they never know what I'm going to do next," Beebe said, chuckling.

Actually, at that point, even Beebe wasn't quite sure what she was going to do next. She didn't even know *where* she was going next.

"They didn't tell us where (the contestants) would be going beforehand," Beebe said. "But it didn't really matter. I knew I couldn't take anything along with me, so packing wasn't an issue."

What the long-time "Survivor" fan did know is that she had been recruited to participate in the 18th season of the popular CBS series. To this day, she's not sure how they got her name.

She recalled that she had applied to be a contestant for season two ("Survivor: The Australian Outback"), but was turned down "for a number of reasons." Since she had applied under a different last name back in 2000, Beebe said she couldn't see how her early attempt at "Survivor"-ship could have had any bearing on her recruitment.

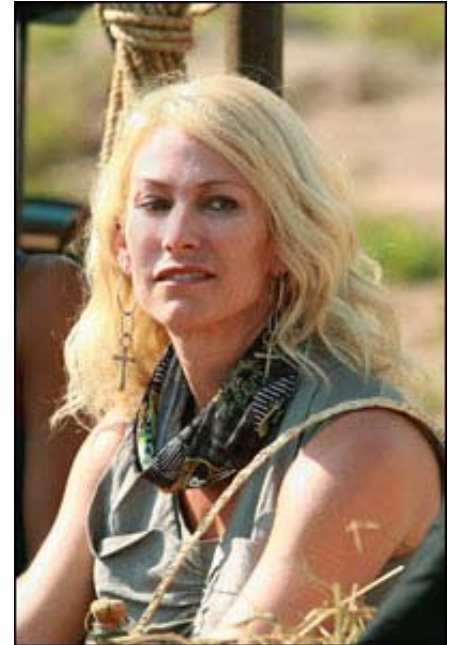
After formally -- and enthusiastically -- agreeing to apply, Beebe filled out an application, made a video and was then flown out to Los Angeles for a round of interviews.

Then she returned home to Alabama to wait.

"I immediately began working out at a local gym from 4:30 to 6 every morning," Beebe said. "I knew that if I were chosen, I'd have to be at the top of my game."

And at age 46, she knew by watching previous episodes of "Survivor" that if she made the cut, she'd probably be one of the older contestants.

"That part bothered me a little bit. I pride myself on looking and acting a lot younger than what I am," she said, matter-of-factly. "I don't go spreading my age around. And now it's going to be out there for the whole world to see!"



Beebe on "Survivor" (Monty Brinton/CBS)



Beebe as a cheerleader at EIU

Standing at 5-feet, 2-inches, Beebe acknowledged that she has always been an athletic and high-energy individual. The Palatine, Ill., native was a physical education major while at Eastern, a member of Alpha Gamma Delta sorority, and she spent all four years of her time at the university (1981-1985) as a cheerleader.

"I'm a Panther!" she added. "I still know Eastern's fight song!"

And, she added, with a touch of pride in her voice, "Sean Payton (now head coach of the New Orleans Saints) attended there at the same time!"

Interviewed a week prior to the Feb. 12 premiere of "Survivor: Tocantins," Beebe faced limitations on what she could and could not say about her adventure. In fact, a CBS publicist sat in during her telephone conversation, and did not hesitate to break in -- nicely -- when forbidden topics were brought up.

He did allow her to say that the location of the filming was "horribly hot."

And Beebe could talk about the last moments she shared with her family -- her husband and her two children and three stepchildren, who range in age from a freshman in high school to a sophomore in college.

"The goodbyes were really hard," she said. "It was very, very difficult to walk out of my life. They took my cell phone -- all means of communication were gone."

Beebe left on her adventure in October and returned "sometime before Christmas." The fact that she was gone for approximately two months is in no way indicative of how well she did on the show.

"The contestants all came home at the same time, regardless of if and when they were voted off," she said. The group is tentatively scheduled to reunite sometime in mid-May for the show's finale and the naming of the "Sole Survivor."

Whether Beebe gets voted off or is named the winner of this season's show, she insists that she's a better person for having participated. "I'm stronger than I've ever been," she said.

She's also enjoying the support she's seeing from her family, her colleagues, and the 900-plus children who attend J.F. Drake Middle School.

"All of them have been supportive and very excited," Beebe said.

And some were shocked. By her own admission, Beebe is a "high heel" sort of woman -- a lady who likes to dress up and look nice.

"One of my students described me as 'Barbie shopping at the mall,'" she added, chuckling. "And that is the real me!"