I’m 5-foot, 3 inches. I’m the brown girl and you don’t see a Miss America that’s got a last name like Benitez. So I didn’t think of myself physically as someone who could compete in a pageant.

It’s a really unique camaraderie because for that year you are the only girls who will know what it’s like to be under the pressure of preparing to be Miss America. You spend all day together rehearsing. You’re dead tired together, you’re cranky together, you cry together and you’re happy together. It’s like a football team, but with lipstick and high heels.

Your first obligation is to prepare to represent your state at the Miss America pageant. Once I finished that, I came home and started a school tour throughout that year. One fifth grader asked, “Are you a model for Victoria’s Secret?” I was like, “No, next.”

I work with kids in foster care to find adoptive homes. If I don’t believe that, there is no reason why anyone else should believe that child deserves a home.

Any social worker, but especially social workers in the child welfare field, have wings on their back, as far as I’m concerned. The stuff they deal with every day can be so ugly and so hard, and yet they show up every day and work for that child.

Adoption works. I’ve seen how adoption and foster care can change children’s lives. We need families to step up to the plate and open their homes for these kids. You’re never more than a phone call away from being a family for a child.

My husband, Jeff Thompson (chief meteorologist for KRNV-TV in Reno and a graduate student in atmospheric sciences at the University), interviewed me when he was a reporter and a weekend weather guy for Channel 4. They said, “Hey we got this press release about the new Miss Nevada. Go out and interview her.” I saw him and I thought he was so cute.

My mom was a waitress here in Nevada and it can be really hard to support three girls economically on the tips that you’re making as a waitress.

My sister had a baby on my 16th birthday. I think the way that has impacted me is I know if I could tell every young girl, especially Latinas, if you really want a child, you have to love that child enough to wait until it’s the right time in your life to have a baby because I cannot tell you how many young girls I see having babies so young in their lives. They are doing a disservice to that child. Wait until you’re able to care for them and provide them everything you can in the world.

I was suspended a couple of times in elementary school for fighting with boys. In the sixth grade, the boys were playing softball and I wanted to play. They said, “No, you can’t play because you’re a girl.” This boy and I got into a shoving match and subsequently ended up with our little fists throwing punches at each other. I got in trouble for that.

I think being a woman policymaker in the state, you just have to be tough as nails. The women that we have serving right now, they didn’t get where they were without a really hard fight.

From a conversation with Pat McDonnell and Ed Cohen Oct. 18, 2006. Benitez-Thompson, 28, is the 2002 Miss Nevada and third runner-up at that year’s Miss America competition. A 2001 Nevada political science alumna, Benitez is an adoption recruitment specialist for Washoe County.