by Darby Baham, Look Magazine: Spring 2005 – Cover Story

Club Woody. It’s the only club in the city where drinks aren’t allowed, but you can find a book on just about anything, use a computer lab, and study for tests. There’s no official dress code. But as a rule of thumb, students in the Atlanta University Center usually get fly before they hit Club Woody at night, because you never know who you might see or who might see you. By day, the building on the campus of Clark Atlanta University known to students as Club Woody is formally referred to as Woodruff Library. It’s a haven for study groups and students trying to escape the mayhem of noisy dorms and loud roommates. It’s the only library in the AUC, so students at Morehouse, Spelman, the Interdenominational Theological Center, and Clark Atlanta share the space, making it a hot spot to mix, mingle, and meet
new people.

In the fall, Victoria Ferguson, an ITC student seeking her Master’s degree in Divinity, was working on a computer in Club Woody when something caught her eye. After doing a double-take, Ferguson noticed that she was studying across from the girl she’d just seen on America’s Next Top Model
the night before.

I heard a bunch of people talking pretty loudly and one voice that sounded real familiar in the group,” Ferguson says. “I was looking, and I said, ‘That girl looks just like Eva!’ I wasn’t sure at first, because her hair had grown out a lot, but it was her. I was like, ‘Oh my gosh! It is Eva!’” Ferguson says that although her studies come first, on Wednesday nights at 8 p.m., she was sure to be in front of a television watching America’s Next Top Model with her friends. And just like millions of other fans across the country, Ferguson had picked her favorite girl on the show who she wanted to win. “I watched America’s Next Top Model every week, but nobody thought that Eva had won because she was back at Clark,” Feguson says. “We just knew that she couldn’t have won and come back to all of this.”

At the time it was August, and Eva had already won. But she hadn’t let the cat out of the bag. So Ferguson, just like every other student on the yard, was clueless. Eva returned to Clark Atlanta and continued working toward her degree in Speech Communications as if everything was normal.

**CLASS ACT**

Prior to Eva Pigford’s days as America’s Next Top Model, she was a regular student at Clark Atlanta University. She says choosing the HBCU was a no-brainer. “I’ve always wanted to go to Clark because my brother, who’s two years older than me, went there,” she says. “I just saw the huge number of black people trying to do positive things and saw the love they had for each other, and it just inspired me.”

Although the 19-year-old supermodel grew up in Los Angeles, she says that coming to Atlanta gave her a change of environment that she needed. “There are a lot of successful black people in L.A., but you don’t see them in one place,” she says. Eva says that she enjoys Atlanta’s nightlife, but everything pales in comparison to just being a student on the yard. Eva, who was filming a sitcom in Toronto at the time of the interview, says that her decision to go back to school after she’d already won America’s Next Top Model is one that she doesn’t regret. “I love it at Clark Atlanta,” she says. “So I had to go back. I wish I could still be there, but I can’t juggle both right now.” Due to a confidentiality clause in the America’s Next Top Model contract, Eva was legally obligated to keep her wonderful achievement on the low.

Although it was hard for her to keep nosy classmates and family members unaware of her accomplishment, Eva says that sticking to the gag order was the best thing she could have done. “When I went back to school and would call friends that I hadn’t spoken to, some of them wouldn’t return my calls,” she says. “But as soon as they found out I’d won, all of a sudden they wanted to hang around me. Being there for that semester gave me a chance to see who my real friends were.”

Eva was not supposed to be America’s next top model— on paper, that is. Supermodels are tall. Eva is short.

Supermodels have long hair. Eva’s is short. Supermodels are prissy. Eva keeps it real. But the one thing Eva had in common with supermodels is the only thing she needed— confidence. It’s what earned her the title “Eva The Diva” and got her over the hump in reality TV land.

“People would say things to me like, ‘you’re cute, but they won’t let you win,’” she says. “They considered me the underdog because I was the shortest one. People said a lot of crazy things to me, but I knew I had what it took to win. I just wasn’t sure if they were going to give it to me. Even on the show, they kept saying Ya-Ya was so refined. That’s why I was so shocked when I won.”

Tyra Banks knows all about beating the odds. As one of the first premier African-American supermodels, Banks has established herself as both a pioneer and icon in her field. Aside from her responsibilities as producer of America’s Next Top Model, Banks has taken Eva under her wing ever since she won. Eva says that Banks has given her invaluable advice on everything from how to discredit the crazy things people say to her to adjusting to her hectic schedule.

“Tyra told me that you have to learn to separate Eva the model from Eva the person,” Eva says. “She says that people are only criticizing the product, not the person. I still hear people say things like, ‘she shouldn’t have made it,’ but I just try to remember that they don’t know me.”

Although Eva has been subjected to harsh criticism along the way, she says that she uses it as motivation. In hindsight, Eva has no regrets, and she credits the show with helping her learn more things about herself. “I learned from everything,” she says. “While doing the show, I read a book about finding your purpose in life. I kept God in my life and kept my focus.”

**OFF THE RUNWAY**

Eva’s long-term goals haven’t changed much since becoming America’s next top model. Although her plans to become a Supreme Court Justice are currently on ice, she hasn’t postponed all of her childhood dreams. In fact, she was en route to accomplishing many of them before she ever made it on the show. As a freshman in college, Eva starred in an independent Christian film called The Walk, with Regina Belle playing her mother and Teck from MTV’s The Real World as her co-star. But Eva’s dreams go far beyond Hollywood. “I want to open up a Center for the Arts so that young kids can have an alternative place to go and express themselves,” Eva says. “My family gave me the opportunity to be around the arts when I was younger, and I would sing my heart out even though I couldn’t carry a tune. But it made who I am today.”

Her aspiration to one day become a Supreme Court Justice haven’t faded altogether either. She says that once she becomes comfortable in her modeling career, returning to the campus to complete her studies is a distinct possiblity. Eva is careful not to limit herself in any area. “I believe God has a plan for me on a larger scale.” she says.

**THE DIVA IN EVA**

America’s Next Top Model didn’t make Eva a diva. Her family gave her that title a long time ago. “I was talking to my mom the other day, and she was telling me how I was so animated when I was young,” Eva says. “She told me when I spoke, it was a gift from God, and that people just wanted to hear me. That’s why they used to call me ‘Little Eva Miss Diva.’ And I thought that was so funny that it ended up being my nickname on the show. They just took the ‘miss’ part out.” Ironically, America didn’t fall in love with the diva side of Eva, as much as her down-to-earth half. She credits her family and friends with keeping her grounded in her newfound stardom. “They’re the people who helped mold me into the person that people can relate to,” Eva says. “I’m just a regular teenager. People can relate to me because of that. And I love the fact that I inspire and motivate people.”

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