

Mrs. Illinois wins title all over again

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The judge's decision is in, and the winner of the 1999 Mrs. Illinois contest is: Mrs. Illinois 1999. Backers of reigning beauty queen Monica Skylling-Burke turned back a legal challenge Friday by first runner-up Lisa Appleby, who had sued last month to wrest the title from her.

Appleby argued that the sponsors of the Mrs. Illinois pageant violated show rules in crowning Skylling-Burke on April 10 because she had won the title once before, committing consumer fraud in the process.

However, Cook County Circuit Judge Thomas A. Hett agreed with Marcie and Joseph Aceto, who run Classic Pageants Inc. of Oak Brook, that the contest was a private institution, free to set and interpret its own rules. Skylling-Burke and eight supporters lingered outside the Daley Center courtroom for more than half an hour after the decision, waiting for Appleby to leave.

When she finally did, Appleby declined to comment and exchanged glares but no words with the other women. "It was a silly and frivolous lawsuit," said the Acetos' attorney, Pete Lubin. "It was a very hurtful lawsuit. It cost a lot of money. (The Acetos) run this as a charity . . . and they end up in court for acting reasonably and honorably."

John Vojta, Appleby's attorney, said no decision had been made on whether to appeal.

Appleby, 31, of Lake View, brand manager for a west suburban company, contended that Skylling-Burke won the contest in 1992 as Monica Skylling-Kraus, only to have the title stripped because she was getting divorced. Pageant rules forbid repeat winners.

Skylling-Burke, in a form-fitting suit, pumps and a white sash proclaiming "Mrs. Illinois 1999," said she was "thrilled" by the ruling.

"This is the best pageant I've ever been involved with. Family is the No. 1 issue with them, as it is to me," said Skylling-Burke, 33, of Palatine, a flight attendant and mother of one.

She leaves Sept. 3 for Hawaii to compete in a Mrs. America contest.