

Area woman in audience for season's final "Survivor"

By Jason Miller, The News-Dispatch

Kristie Ahern has watched just about every episode of the reality show "Survivor" since it debuted on CBS in 2000. Until last month, she never imagined she'd get to be a part of the show.

Ahern, a Michigan City business owner, made herself at home on the red carpet earlier this month when she attended the two-hour live finale of the show's fourth season as a guest of one of its contestants.

"Never in a million years," Ahern said this week when asked if she ever thought she'd get to share space with the television stars she's watched for the past four years. "I couldn't believe he'd get on, so I never thought we'd go."

"He" is former Hobart resident and Valparaiso University graduate John "John P." Palyok. Palyok has dated one of Ahern's best friends for the better part of a decade, and the two now live in Los Angeles, where Palyok is a sales manager for Home Depot.

It wasn't Ahern's relationship with Palyok's girlfriend that got her interested in "Survivor," but it was that friendship that allowed her to spend three days with "Survivor" cast members past and present, and to personally see the announcement of the last person voted off the island.

"I was so excited when (her friend, Tammy) called and told me they wanted me to go," Ahern said. "But then I was in tears because she called back and didn't know if there were enough tickets.

"Of course, by that time I'd told everyone I know. It turned out that there were enough tickets. What a great experience."

Ahern, along with Palyok's girlfriend and two relatives, flew to Los Angeles on CBS' dime, stayed in a four-star hotel and blended in not only with "Survivor" cast members, but with the show's producer, Mark Burnett, and its host, Jeff Probst.

The coffee table in Ahern's rural Michigan City living room is filled with memorabilia from the trip, including nearly 100 photos of her being embraced by cast members, two of the show's trademark bandanas, and a T-shirt or two.

When asked if she thought she'd ever wear a "Survivor" bandana, Ahern said she wouldn't last a day on the show. Despite her love of reality television, she said, the only show she'd probably enjoy taking part in would be CBS' other primetime show, "Big Brother."

"They'd boot me out like that," Ahern said, snapping her fingers. "I don't like the water and so much of what they do is in the water. I'm just not right for that kind of stuff."

Ahern's husband, Brian, didn't make the trip with his wife and, admittedly, isn't a fan of reality television. However, he couldn't help but enjoy a telephone call he received from his wife while she was in California.

Her favorite "Survivor" cast member - Indianapolis resident Rupert - gave Brian a hearty hello from the other end of the line.

"I have to admit, that was pretty cool," Brian said. "She woke me up, but it was worth it."

Was Brian jealous of his wife and her California vacation with the stars?

"No. I was so busy with work, I couldn't have gone anyway," he said. "I'm just glad she had a good time. It's neat being so involved with all of this."

True to the show's form, Ahern didn't know until the live finale who was the final "Survivor" standing. But she liked it that way, she said. It made the show even more real.

"I love reality. I don't like actors," she said. "I like anything where there's conflict and nothing is scripted. It was all like that."

"Nobody knew until it was announced who won. It was all a lot of fun."

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