

The Changing Face of Pageants



Yesterday's beauty queens
are today's community
ambassadors.

By Glenna Turnbull



I remember as a child watching the Miss America pageant on TV, the beautiful young women who paraded in bathing suits, competed in talent shows then donned painted-on shimmering evening gowns to see who would be named to wear the crown. The winner would inevitably bawl like a baby as she walked down the aisle balancing her tiara and waving tearfully. My sister and I would practice by balancing books on our heads and waving to each other in our Speedos, but my book always crashed to the ground, and somehow, my Speedo just didn't cut it either.

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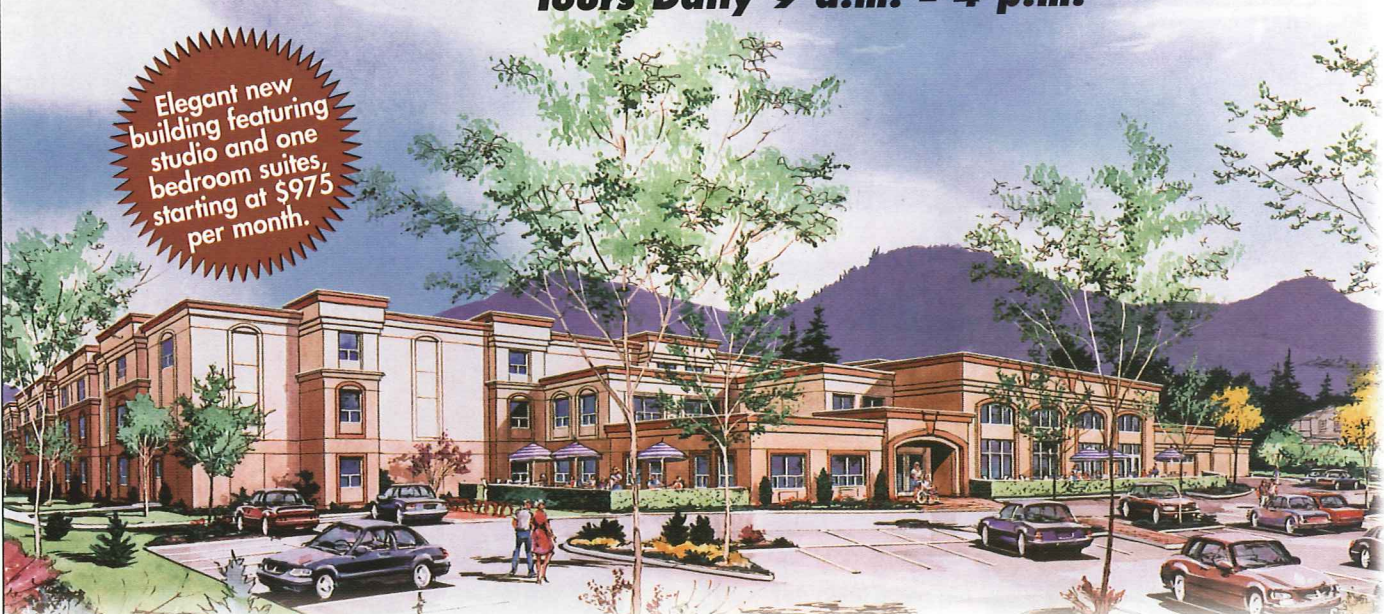
These days, however, young women have new role models to admire and thankfully, beauty contests as we knew them are a thing of the past. Take for example this year's Kelowna Lady of the Lake pageant. While balancing a tiara and being a quick-change artist for the fashion show may have earned contestants some points, the lessons they learned during competition included much trickier balancing and changing acts, such as how to balance a cheque book and change the oil in a car!

Recently, the city of Kelowna elected its 2001 Lady of the Lake and Princess, and catching up with them to see how much the face of beauty pageants has changed turned out to be an eye opener. Bathing suit competition marks have been replaced by local history exam marks; the evening wear competition not only involves a candidate's ability to gracefully carry herself in a gown (without balancing a book!) but to think on her feet and answer unrehearsed questions as well. And as for the talent competition, don't just expect to find singers and pianists, this year's Peachland Ambassador competition even included a woman who's talent was her ability to throw curve balls, change-ups and sliders.

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Ursula Gohmann, chairperson of Vernon's Queen Silver Star Excellence Program, doesn't even use the word "talent" in their program anymore. "We changed the name of it from 'talent' to 'showcase' because it isn't necessarily the best singer, dancer or violin player, it's a matter of the girl presenting to the community the types of things she is interested in. We had a girl do a craft show and another who was into photography that did a slide presentation. It gives each candidate the opportunity to show the community the types of things she's interested in, therefore showing she has some balance in her life."

Gohmann notes that perhaps the biggest change of all in pageants over the year's is the removal of the word "beauty" from the title. "They're actually not beauty pageants anymore," says Gohmann, "you can 'X' the word 'beauty' right out of there. We consider it more of an excellence program. We help to educate the candidates as far as the types of things they need to go onto the next step in life...it's like a finishing school."

One of the primary focuses in each of the valley's royalty programs is on volunteering in their own community, both as candidates and as reigning royalty. The Vernon program insists that each candidate do 12 to 16 hours of volunteer work at one of their chosen charities. This year, candidates can choose between the S.P.C.A. and the Vernon Rest Home. And that's just while they're candidates. Reigning royalty can put in that many volunteer hours in just a few weeks.

For Tricia Fenton, this year's Kelowna Lady of the Lake, and Princess Michelle Mandryk, after being crowned July 20, their tour of duty started immediately. First was a ride on the City of Kelowna float in the Regatta parade July 21, followed almost immediately by an appearance in Seattle's Seafair Torch Light Parade. "It was amazing, an awesome experience," says Fenton of her first road trip in the royalty caravan. "There were 300,000 spectators and everyone was yelling, 'yeah Canada!'"

But there's much more involved in representing your community than just learning to balance on a float and wave with one hand while hanging on with the other on a winding parade processions across the Pacific Northwest. The biggest role for these young women (and men) is to be ambassadors for their community, both at home and away.

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TRICIA FENTON (LEFT) AND MICHELLE MANDRYK (RIGHT) TAKING PART IN LADY OF THE LAKE 2001.

"It is very hard work," says Shannon Bews Croft, public relations director for the Miss Kelowna Lady of the Lake. "Really, it is a huge commitment. Think about it - they have to get their school work done, their jobs, and then five hours of time from us a week...it's like having another job."

So, what would make a young woman want to take part in such a program? Back when the Miss Kelowna Lady of the Lake competition started 72 years ago, it was a beauty contest to find a queen for Regatta. Dorothy (Smith) Coleman was runner up in 1939, and smiles as she recalls the competition in those days. "You were just asked by some group to be their entry in the Lady of the Lake competition, then you walked up about 20 stairs, paraded around the platform, then walked down the other side and the five judges

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decided who looked the nicest, had the best figure and paraded the best. I was not a good walker," she laughs.

These days, young women are just as interested in the skills taught during the training program as they are in actually winning a title. Katie Adams Eccott, Kelowna's Lady of the Lake for 2000, has just finished her tour of duty, and had nothing but praise for the program. But then again, why wouldn't she? During her year as Kelowna Lady of the Lake not only did she get to travel all over the Pacific Northwest representing Kelowna, but was also invited to Kasugai, Japan.

Like many who have participated in the Valley's royalty programs, one of the most valuable skills Katie learned was public speaking. "After the training we were given you don't get nervous, it just flows out and you're able to speak in front of a group of people without having to sit down and worry about what you're going to say. It just comes easier. For example, when I was in Japan, I had to go up on stage at a trade show and this lady, who was speaking Japanese, suddenly held the microphone in front of me. I'd had no idea what she'd been saying so I had to come up with something right on the spot. Without the training I never could have done that."

In some of the more progressive thinking communities, young women aren't the only ones participating in these royalty programs. Peachland, for example, not only has a female ambassador, but a male as well. Ricki Morin is the director of the Peachland Ambassadorial Committee. She says they have had young men representing Peachland since October 1994.

"It was a simple reason: I'm a mother of a son as well as a daughter. When I supervised at schools I saw so many young males who would have been interested in doing something like that, so I said, why not boys? We're all equal in our society today, so why can't we have males being ambassadors of the town they live in?"

She brought it forward to the municipality of Peachland where it was "very nicely" accepted, then started phoning around to see what kind of interest she could create for it. "I had six gentlemen the first year, and the boys were just as excited as the young ladies."

The town of Oliver adopted the idea as well, as did Merritt, however, Morin notes that Merritt has since dropped the program for young men. In Kelowna, Shannon Bews Croft says that

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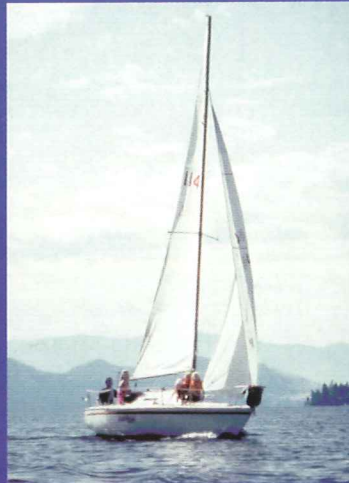
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although they had considered the idea, it wasn't feasible primarily due to finances. Travelling with two young women who can share a hotel room is one thing, but add a young man into the picture and accommodation expenses double for every trip.

It's too bad, because, according to Morin, the program is just as positive for teen boys as it is girls. "We do simple mechanics, skin care, how to tie a tie, as well as etiquette, proper sitting and dining, proper behavior in public and toastmasters for nearly three months. We've also added Latin and ballroom dancing, the history of Peachland as well as modeling, and how to properly chose clothes. There are many aspects of the pageant that are not just geared for young women."

And while the female title holders of the Valley's many pageants can go on to represent their city in the Miss BC Pageant, male ambassadors, such as Peachland's, may go on to represent their community in the BC Ambassador's competition. "It was established last year and allows males and females to run for the positions," says Morin.

Along with the tiaras and prestige, the toastmasters course and the other skills available to learn, there is still another reason which lures our teens to the pageants, and that's scholarships. Candidates have the opportunity to earn valuable bursaries and scholarships to help with post-secondary education. And Morin notes that, with the confidence most teens gain in the program, their marks tend to go up as a result of the skills they learn.

Most Valley communities have their royalty pageants open to teens who will be celebrating their 16th to 18th birthday during the year they'd be reigning, but each municipality has its own individual criteria which applicants must meet. Each year, reigning royalty make the rounds to all of the Valley high schools to promote the programs. If you have a daughter (or a son and live in Peachland), who might be interested in taking advantage of these opportunities, contact your local high school or Chamber of Commerce for more information. Ability to balance books on heads not required. ■