

Children and Beauty Pageants

by Kareen Nussbaum

Beauty pageants became part of the American society in the 1920's. Child beauty pageants began in the 1960's. Child beauty pageants consist of modeling sportswear, evening attire, dance and talent. The children are judged based on individuality in looks, capability, poise, perfection and confidence. As the judges call it, "the complete package". School aged children were researched based on the influence competition has on their education and self-confidence. Children between the ages of six and twelve were considered as school aged and were researched in this work. These are children that are relatively new to school education due to their young age, they are required by law to receive education, and are still impressionable by their parents. The children are divided into age groups so the competition would be objective for the participants. Stage mothers were taken into consideration involving the child's management, assessing that the mother introduced the child into the pageantry world. There are no laws concerning beauty pageants in New York, Texas, Massachusetts, Arkansas, California, Vermont and Maine so therefore it is presumed that there are no laws concerning beauty pageants. Beauty pageant history, regulations, guidelines, and controlling authorities are researched, along with their effectiveness and recommendations.

Beauty pageants originated as a marketing tool in 1921 by an Atlantic City hotel owner who wanted the city's tourists to remain in town longer. A local news reporter started the infamous term, still used today by saying, "lets call her 'Miss America'!" Pageants were introduced into the lives of Americans and became a major event, although they were discontinued from 1929-1932 due to the Great Depression.

As the years progressed, pageants served as political, educational and entertaining events. Pageants offered scholarships and helped beneficial programs. Marking a racial breakthrough, in 1983 Vanessa Williams becomes the first African-American titled Miss America. In 1994 the first handicapped woman wins the title of Miss America. The pageantry world helps introduce a face to the faceless troubles of racism, handicaps and illnesses.

According to the Attorney General of the Department of Justice in California, "there is no law that prescribes how a pageant must be managed, the rules are set by each contest promoter." Pageants are usually operated by for-profit organizations that produce a local, state or national contest that appeal to many age groups for different reasons. Some mothers lie about their child's age so the child can appear more mature and poised for that age group; now some pageants require birth certificates along with the entry forms to validate age. Beauty pageants are one of the fastest growing businesses in America grossing over 5 billion dollars (Coleman, Phyllis). The prizes differ depending on the size of the contest; radios, bicycles, grants, cash awards, trophies and tiaras are some examples. Some of the criteria considered in judging a pageant are writing skills, interviews, personality, looks, confidence and talent, depending on the specific competition. There is a fee required in entering a pageant, which may include entry, rental fees, awards, administrative costs and company profits. Participants have other

expenses like clothing, hair, make-up and sometimes hiring a make-up artist, travel, food and lodging. According to the Better Business Bureau, at least one state has a requirement for new promoters within the state to place a deposit in order to protect entry fees of contestants. Although none of the states researched have that law.

Individual beauty pageants set their own guidelines for their participants, since they are exempt from the federal child labor laws (Fair Labor Standards Act, 1938). Child pageant contestants are not considered to be "working" children although they receive money and prizes for their performances and practice for hours per week to achieve those goals. A beauty pageant is operated in a couple of ways, either corporate sponsors, where the competitors must meet eligibility requirements to participate. The second way of operating a pageant is by putting the responsibility on the participants. The applicants are responsible for travel, lodging, entry fees, wardrobe, and sometimes the cost of the crown and prizes. Generally the contestants are required to get sponsors, sell tickets and advertise to compensate for expenses.

In Universal Royalty pageant, the country's largest child beauty pageant, all contestants receive an award for participating. There are sixty contestants from the age of zero to thirty years old, all divided into different age groups. As soon as the child can sit up on her/his own s/he can enter the pageant. A competition is held usually every few weeks. There is a minimum cost of \$545 to enter the pageant, which covers basic entry fees. Another \$395 is needed for the maximum options of this pageant. The average cost of the pageant is about \$655 which includes the formal wear, sports wear and dance. The average cost does not include travel, hotel and food, which can be up to an extra two hundred dollars. According to several stage mothers participating in Universal Royalty, dresses for sports and formal wear can cost up to \$12,000 with a minimum of \$1500. The grand supreme winner receives one thousand dollars in cash, ten-inch crystal crown, six-foot trophy, supreme entry paid in full to nationals, tote bag, satin rhinestone banner, teddy bear, bouquet of long stem red roses, gifts, video of the pageant, and photo on advertisement of beauty pageant. The participants are also required to bring gifts to the winning king and queen. Different beauty pageants offer optional competitions inside the pageant, like decorating your door, dad competition and talent. In Universal Royalty, family values are enforced. Therefore, the dad competition is free of charge and there is a fifty-dollar award and a plaque for the winner. Based on the competition, the child is judged differently, points are scored in each domain of the pageant, and the most overall points earn the participant the grand supreme prize. Prizes for overall photogenic are prejudged from photos sent before the pageant. Each part of the competition has an entry fee to participate.

Annette Hill is the director of Universal Royalty, she believes in an organized and professional competition. Annette was a former child pageant competitor, and also had her daughters participate. Seven years ago she decided to open a pageant of her own. She enforces family values by making a dad competition, which includes the fathers in the competition as well. According to Charles Dunn, publisher of Pageantry Magazine, "Every year beauty pageants show off 100,000 children under the age of twelve." Usually the mothers are the controlling authority over the competitors. The inexperienced mothers seem more pleased with any award the child receives at the

pageant and less critical of the child's mistakes on stage contrary to the experienced moms who seem more disappointed than their child to receive a lower-classed award than imagined. "There is no chance for a mistake", as said by Annette Hill on her own pageant.

Preparing for the pageant requires time and patience, hair lasting around an hour and forty-five minutes, make-up around an hour. Different performances for every pageant require some participants to practice for about seven hours a week. Stage mothers for the eight to ten age group in Universal Royalty, say it is worth all the trouble and effort since it instills happiness, poise in front of a crowd, confidence, pride and a sense of accomplishment. In this particular event, the eight to ten age group was the toughest competition in Universal Royalty because three of the girls were more experienced, one girl even having her mom coach other pageantry children. For example, Sabra Johnson, a ten year old experienced child contestant, one of the threatening ingredients in this competition has aspirations of landing a major modeling career and until then, modeling at the pageants. Sabra started competing in pageants at the age of four and was awarded three hundred trophies. While the child was interviewed by A&E Network she kept looking over at her mom for reassurance of her thoughts. She never mentioned coming education; she solely relied on her appearance for her future.

In a phone conversation, Annette Hill stated that pageants are like extra curricular activities in school; they should not interfere with schooling. The most participants should ever miss is a half a day on Friday for traveling purposes. Pageants are normally performed on weekends; practice is accomplished after school so, therefore, education should not be an issue. The real concern should be on future education needs; all of the girls aged eight to ten interviewed by A&E Network were not concerned with further education. They had false aspirations. One participant named Thumper Gosney has aspirations of becoming a model when she grows up; the chances of Thumper landing a major modeling career are slim to none. According to the Better Business Bureau, not too many pageantry competitors land modeling careers when they mature.

William Pinsof, a clinical psychologist and president of the Family Institute at Northwestern University said, " Being a little Barbie doll says your body has to be a certain way and your hair has to be a certain way. In girls particularly, this can unleash a whole complex of destructive self-experiences that can lead to eating disorders and all kinds of body distortions in terms of body image." Traveling, stress and competition are everyday aspects of an adult's life, an average day of an adult requires at least these three aspects to make it to lunch hour, but at the age of eight, stress about body ideals, modeling, and trophies should not come into existence. Since there are no set rules concerning promoters, organizers and participants, pageants are neglected by laws governing them. Organizers want to earn money and are not concerned with the need to protect their participants, and they don't. According to Phyllis Coleman, a professor of law at Nova Southeastern University, 3,000 pageants attract 250,000 children per year. According to the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment and Adoption Reform Act, child abuse is defined as, "the physical or mental injury, sexual abuse or exploitation of a child under circumstances which indicate the child's health or welfare is harmed or threatened." Most stage mothers claim that their child wanted to enter the pageant on

her own. Does an eight-year-old girl know what is best for her? In 1996 seven-year-old Jessica Duboff died when her parents allowed her to fly a plane across the country because she liked it. Should parents rely on their children to know what is best for them?

Child abuse is defined as exploitation of a child, are these parents exploiting their child beauties? On a study done by Levey who researched child beauty pageants of the two to six age group for the Harvard University Gazette, she interviewed forty-one pageant mothers who participate in an average of five pageants per year. Levey concluded that mothers of lower-income and education, enter their children in pageants because they want their children to learn the proper skills necessary to move up the social scale. One stage mother said, "I want my child to be aware that there's going to be somebody better than her. It's a hard thing to learn, it was for me, and I want her to start early." Parents with higher incomes and education beyond high school often justify pageants by explaining that competition is essential for their children to become successful. According to Levey, the upper class mothers want their daughters to become lawyers, doctors or to have professional careers.

"Pageants are hard and you try to remember all those steps, sometimes they give me crowns that are hard to balance", says Gabrielle, a child participant since eleven months of age. At five years old, Gabrielle wants to quit the pageant experience and her mother respects her decision. This stage mother is an opposing example of the aggressive behavior that is confronted throughout the pageants; Gabrielle's mom accepts her decision and honors it. Gabrielle now hopes to start a modeling career, once again no mention of further education. "It's a little girl dream, dreams have to start somewhere", says Dorothy, a sixteen year old, competing for twelve years. That's true, dreams do start from somewhere, maybe a movie, book or even a person, but at the age of four and younger, is it always right to start acting out the dream? Dreams are not always meant to be fulfilled, sometimes they are not in our power to accomplish, but do we need to know the harsh realities of unfulfilled dreams and disappointment at such a tender age. Laws and regulations are needed for this arena; organizers, and worst of all, parents are manipulating innocent kids. Mothers take their kids and live vicariously through them. In order to improve the inadequacy of pageant regulation, every state should pass the bonding law, which states that a deposit is required for new promoters to assert the security of the participants. This only exists in a few states, none of which researched here. There should be guidelines for the hours of work on stage, practice and travel. Organizers should be required to attain a certificate allowing them to work with children. Make-up and hair should be limited as to not enforce sexuality in such a young age. All the participants should receive some kind of an award for participating, reducing the disappointment. Although education is not necessarily effected at the present moment, the participating children do not plan ahead based on their mind but on their appearances, most talked about modeling as the next step. On the A&E Network interview, all the experienced girls, while talking, looked at their stage mothers for reassurance of the last utterance spoken. If the girls were asked a question, the mother sitting very close to her daughter corrected any forgotten words, as if rehearsed.

Beauty pageants are one of the fastest growing industries in the United States. The government should regulate such an extensive enterprise, to provide safety, especially since it deals with children. The government protects the juvenile's health from smoking and drinking and provides education and safety. Children have rights and laws guarding them against manipulative adults, aren't these pageants a marketing tool aimed at children? JonBenét Ramsey's death influenced the public to believe that all pageants promote sexuality and mistreatment, but there are always two sides to every story. Throughout the research, pageants proved to be both a negative and positive influence depending on their surroundings. Pageants that regulate make-up usage, sexuality and competition are recognized to be great experiences for children. For example, Beatriz Gill a child pageant director and a former child participant, does not allow make-up or snug costumes in her pageants. Beatriz is one of many that have a positive outlook on pageants, she believes that pageants helped her become confident and self-assured. On the other hand, many of the pageants researched did allow excessive make-up, hair and clothing. Some had exceptional qualities like offering awards for all participants. I believe that pageants have a long road before achieving a safe environment for children without introducing them to competition, sexuality and disappointment too early in life.

<http://www.minorcon.org/pageants.html>