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BREAKING NEWS Canada's Bob Thirsk blasts off

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May 19, 2009

- ▶ HOMEPAGE
- VIDEO GALLERY
- PHOTO GALLERIES
- COMMENT ON A STORY
- ACROSS CANADA
- WORLD WATCH
- LATEST BREAKING NEWS
- WEIRD NEWS
- CRIME
- POLITICS
- DAILY FEATURE
- MEDIA NEWS
- SCIENCE
- ENVIRONMENT
- GOOD NEWS**
- TECHNOLOGY
- Sun Papers
- Columnists
- Lotteries
- Weather
- RSS Feed 

### From street kid to beauty queen

By **MIKE STROBEL**  
The Toronto Sun

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TORONTO -- Nothing brings out the lustre of fame quite like a touch of tragedy.

Danny Gokey, for instance, started his American Idol quest barely a month after his wife, Sophia, died from complications of heart surgery.

Every time he took the stage, until he was bumped last week, you imagined he was singing for her.

PGA golfer Sean O'Hair is known less for his fine putting stroke than for his estrangement from his dad, who treated him like a dog when he was a teen.



Rosalba Vagge is all smiles with her brother Juan Carlos backstage at the John Bassett Theatre last night, home of the Miss Universe Canada pageant. (JACK BOLAND/Sun Media)

Last week, O'Hair said, "I guess my story is compelling, so people want to know about that stuff."

We sure do. We like to know the glamour pusses of this world suffer life's pains, like we do.

Besides, if it bleeds it leads, as any old newspaperman will tell you.

#### GLITZ, GLAMOUR

Even at the Miss Universe Canada pageant, which has brought glitz and glamour to Toronto all week. I'm a judge, so I've learned a few things about these young women beyond their frozen smiles and silky physiques.

Even the beautiful bear wounds. And I don't mean broken nails or split ends.

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- I pull over
- I hold it to talk
- I use speaker phone
- I use an earpiece
- I text
- I text at stops only
- I don't use it while driving
- I don't have a cell
- I don't drive

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#### photo OF THE DAY



Consider for a moment Christina Walls, 25, a languid beauty from Salt Spring Island, B.C.

The gods gave her hair like burnished gold -- and cancer in her lungs.

Surgeons removed the tumours four years ago, and now she is an advocate for holistic health and a busy cancer fund-raiser.

There are three nurses among the 56 women. They can tell you as many tales of ravaged bodies, gushing blood and substance abuse as you care to hear.

But no story tops that of Rosalba Vagge, 26, of Vancouver.

"I used to be afraid to tell people about it," she tells me. "I worried they'd feel sorry for me.

"But don't feel sorry for me. Feel happy for me that I'm here."

And there she is, glorious in a red mermaid dress under lights at the John Bassett Theatre. Her stride is steady. She has modelled from China to Peru.

She was Miss Photogenic at the Miss Latina Canada 2009 pageant. She speaks three languages, including Italian from her adoptive dad.

Spanish, she learned in Mexico City. The hard way.

She was still in diapers when her birth parents left her to her fate in the dirty din of that metropolis. Her and her brother, Juan Carlos.

For four years, they were Chiclet Kids.

SOLD CANDIES

By day they sold candies, thrusting their grimy faces into car windows and smiling winningly.

By night, they huddled in the nearest nook. Their family were countless other abandoned children. Their food was pilfered from stores.

She's not sure who gave them names. Their birthdays are still a guess.

"We learned how to run fast," Rosalba tells me. "In and out of traffic, or away from police.

"We learned to fear adults."

With good reason. Some adults sold you if they caught you. Even a few crooked cops did that.

"My brother and I, we stuck together like glue," says Rosalba. "He protected me. I still remember him yelling 'Run, run' and pulling me away."

Lucky for Rosalba and Juan Carlos, the cop who grabbed them had a good heart. He dropped them at an orphanage.

They were there a year. It was no picnic either. But their lives turned.

In Rosalba's memory, faces flicker in the orphanage "viewing window." Two kind faces from Canada. There are sharper images of a warm house up north, her brother still by her side. Of cowering under a desk the first day of kindergarten. Of soccer, and track, and cheerleading. Of finally, fully, leaving the streets of Mexico City behind.

Juan Carlos, 28, is still there, in many ways.

That's him behind us judges, hollering his sister's name and swearing in Spanish. He can't help it. That's what he does when he gets excited. Four years as a Chiclet Kid can do things to you.

But later he tells her how beautiful she looked, how proud he is of her.

Maybe now, they can both stop running.

STROBEL'S COLUMN RUNS WEDNESDAY TO FRIDAY, AND SUNDAY.  
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#### Across Canada

Tori case prompts Amber Alert probe  
 Hopefuls strut their stuff to be Miss Hooters  
 Canada's Bob Thirsk blasts off  
 Drunk driver left pal dying on roadside  
 Teen faces 22 charges  
 Footlong Fugitive loyal to Subway  
 Another police shooting in Calgary  
 Slain girl battled disease

#### Good News

Road-hog rescue  
 Terminally ill dog saves owner from blaze

#### Science

Canada's Bob Thirsk blasts into space  
 Earliest evidence found for leprosy

#### Environment

Study says reusable grocery bags dangerous  
 U.S. says carbon pollution will grow by nearly 40 per cent by 2030

#### Crime

Slain girl battled disease  
 Drunk driver left pal dying on roadside

#### Sun Papers

- Calgary Sun
- Edmonton Sun
- Ottawa Sun
- 24 Hours

#### World Watch

North Korea threatens war  
 Tiger mauls zookeeper to death  
 Dog that saved owner from fire is euthanized  
 Woman's body in freezer 20 years  
 Sri Lanka bars Red Cross  
 The Louvre accused of discrimination  
 Cyclone Aila death toll rises  
 Dozens die in Lahore car bombing

#### Media News

Canadian journalist fears she'll die in Somalia  
 Stackhouse named Globe and Mail editor-in-chief

#### Weird News

Footlong Fugitive loyal to Subway  
 Ex-schools trustee gets probation in ketchup theft

#### Politics

Watchdog warns of isotope crisis  
 Alberta wrestles with classroom rights

#### Photo Galleries

The lottery winners  
 Beauties for a cause

- Toronto Sun
- London Free Press
- Winnipeg Sun

TOP OF PAGE 

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