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'I went there trying to be myself'

Posted 14 days ago

Richmond Hill's Mariana Valente conquered Canada last night and hopes to takeover the universe in a few months.

The 23-year-old York University student was crowned Miss Universe Canada Saturday night. She'll be competing for the title of Miss Universe in the Bahamas in August.

But yesterday, the 5-foot-9 Brazilian-born bombshell had a more pressing challenge to prepare for -- a French linguistics exam at York today.

It's that down to earth style that Valente thinks helped her beat out more than 50 other contestants to win the pageant.

"The strategy that I used was being myself, that's all I could do. I went there trying to be myself and that's what I did," said the brown-eyed brunette. "I'm happy the judges were able to see that myself is a good thing.

"I think they were able to see I'm a humble person, I'm real and I'm ready to represent Canada."

After sleeping in a bit, she spent most of yesterday talking to the relatives and friends who called to congratulate her. Her mom had been up since 6 a. m. spreading the news.

"I'm really, really grateful to be in this position and I just want to say it was really a tough competition," Valente said. "There was so many wonderful women there (Saturday) night, so many smart women that I'm so proud to say that I was able to compete with them."

In her fourth year of French studies at York, Valente hopes to one day be a kindergarten teacher at a French immersion school. But first, she wants to win the title of Miss Universe.

"I know it takes a lot to be there so you have to work hard," she said. "It's not only working out on the outside, but also preparation in terms of how to carry yourself and how to really represent Canada and make everybody proud."

She's no stranger to winning: Valente competed for the title of Miss Brazil Canada in 2005 and **won the title of Miss Latina Canada 2007.**

Shortly after being crowned Miss Latina, she appeared as a Sunshine Girl.

When she's not studying, modeling or competing in the pageant world, Valente is helping the charity she and her family founded to raise money for Brazil's children. Valente was originally born in Brazil and came to Canada at age 12.

The three-year-old charity, Brazilian Association for Social and Educational Support, has almost finished rebuilding a house for abused children in Brazil.

Now that she's been crowned Miss Universe Canada, Valente hopes she can take that charity work to a new level.

"That's one of my goals, to help on a much bigger scale. Once you have a title like this, you have so many opportunities to help on a much bigger scale," she said.

If Valente does win the title of Miss Universe, she'll be following in the footsteps of Toronto beauty Natalie Glebova who clinched the crown in 2005.

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