

Beauty pageant became test of woman's character Faces and Places

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Stefany Singh, this year's Ms Latina Canada, knew when she competed for the world title she would be judged for her looks, poise and intelligence.

But the Ms Latina World Pageant, held in Miami in November, also turned out to be a test of character.

And in that contest, the Richmond Hill resident won hands down. Though she may not have taken home the world title, Ms Singh was voted Miss Congeniality by contestants and producers.

"I nearly passed out from shock. I was so surprised," said Ms Singh, who brought Canadian flags for the contestants. "I gave them out and said, 'Canada's neutral. We love all you guys.'"

Ms Singh, 21, is a third-year student in public policy and administration at York University. She plans to earn a law degree with the ultimate goal of pursuing a career in politics, her real passion.

The pageant was broadcast by Telemundo International to 7.8 million homes. In Canada, it is expected to be televised by satellite within the next month or so. An exact date has not been announced.



Staff Photo/Sjoerd Witteveen

Stefany Singh of Richmond Hill was voted Miss Congeniality at the Ms Latina World Pageant.

For Ms Singh, who was chosen Ms Latina Canada in July, it has been an emotional year.

She originally wanted to enter the El Mundo Latino Internacional contest, the largest Latin pageant in Canada. But it turned out she wasn't tall enough. Disappointed, she went online and applied to as many pageants as she could, just to see what might turn up.

The call was answered by Dawn Ramos Productions, which produces Ms Latina World, Ms Latina USA and Teen Latina USA pageants.

But the excitement of being chosen to represent Canada at the international Ms Latina pageant turned to frustration when she began looking for sponsors. Pageant participants must pay their own way, about \$1,500 U.S., and they receive support from businesses. Ms Singh began asking every business she could think of, but even Latino companies were unresponsive.

"In Canada, pageants are not highly regarded and it's very difficult," she said. "Many Canadian companies even have bans against supporting pageants."

By the end of the summer, she was discouraged.

"I said to my mom 'I don't think I can do this,'" she recalled, laughing. "But she said, 'This is the chance of a lifetime. You should try your best.'"

So she sponsored herself. And the pageant did not disappoint. Everywhere contestants went, they were mobbed. There were limos, news conferences, guest appearances and photo shoots.

"It was nothing like what I thought it would be. From the minute we put on our sashes, it was constant bombardment of people wanting to hold our hands, wanting to hug us, wanting our autographs, wanting pictures with us," she said. "You became an instant celebrity. We couldn't go anywhere without the bodyguards because we would just get swarmed from the moment we'd walk out of our hotel. It was amazing."

But, like Dorothy in Oz, she also found it wasn't all good. Some contestants make a career of "doing" pageants and they're not there to have a good time.

"It's almost like Survivor," she said laughing. "It's competition. It's every man for himself, but you still have to be friends with everyone. So there's a lot of alliance-building, cliques, as well as a lot of backstabbing."

They also had a 24-hour camera on them, recording everything they did, for a "reality" behind-the-scenes film.

On a personal level, winning the title was also painful for Ms Singh. Though most of her friends were supportive, it was not unanimous. She lost one friendship altogether, a woman who was also of Latin descent, who said she was misrepresenting Latin culture because she was not of full Latin heritage.

Ms Singh's parents come from Trinidad and Tobago, her grandparents came from Venezuela. The Ms Latina pageant requires contestants to be at least 25 per cent Hispanic.

But the way she sees it, Latin culture goes far beyond South and Central America.

"The Caribbean islands have had a huge impact on South America. The food, the passion for music, the life, the central role of the family and religion," she said. "I'm lucky in that way, because I get both cultures and I get to see all aspects of Latin culture."

"I felt I was lucky, too, in representing Canada, which is multicultural country. I myself am a bi-racial child so I bring both of those cultures and representing Canada to the world. I was very proud of that."

The pageant's exposure helped Ms Singh, who had done some modelling before the title, to obtain a modelling contract with a larger company, Carolyn's Model and Talent. She's also now modelling for Junior Bashman, the fashion designer for Hardcore Jeans, and will be participating in a fashion show at Paradise Banquet and Convention Centre in Concord Feb. 21.

<***overflow***>But the title has also given her the opportunity to help a few charities close to her heart. She has appeared at media events and fundraisers for Yellow Brick House.

She's also planning some fundraisers in co-operation with the Fragile X Research Foundation of Canada. The illness, the result of a tear in the X-chromosome in the brain, causes a form of developmental delay. Ms Singh's younger brother suffers from the illness.

For more information about the fashion show, call 416-852-4643.