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Miss Black America Cleveland crowns three jewels

By FELICIA C. HANEY

Staff Reporter

Did you know that the Miss Black America Cleveland contest was recently held in Cleveland? If not, don't feel bad. There weren't many who were in the know on what should have been a much more highly publicized event. Held at the Slovenian Society Auditorium June 26, the regional contest was produced by J. Morris Anderson Production Company. Nevertheless, it didn't make the winners' victory any less significant, praiseworthy, and in this sense, newsworthy.

Broken down into three categories: Little Miss Black America competition, Miss Black America Teen competition and the adult competition, there was room for three winners out of all the contestants who came from all over Ohio. On a recent visit to the Call & Post's office two of the three beauty queens, Marie Payden, 26, and Madison Wilson, 10, showed up with tiaras in tow to tell their stories of pageantry, perseverance and how seemingly overnight they became princesses in their own right.

Having never entered a contest of this caliber before, Marie and Madison first explained how they came to be in Miss Black America Cleveland. “I found out about it a year and a half ago,” said Marie, who took home top honors as Miss Black America Cleveland. “Fox 8 briefly put it across the screen and I only saw it the one time. They were saying we’re having auditions at the Karamu Theater at such-n-such a time on such-n-such a date, be there. That was March 2010. So, I went and auditioned. I did one of my original [poetry] pieces and they were checking out overall physique and how well you put yourself together and then a lady called me back to say ‘You made it to the second round.’ Then, it was almost a year later before we got this started again.”

Madison, the newly crowned Little Miss Black America Cleveland, spoke of her route to royalty as well saying, “My mom has a friend that works at Dreams Modeling and Talent Agency. She sent us down to the Playhouse Theatre the night Cedric the Entertainer was there. She told us what the pageant was about and what they were looking for.” Her rep, Tawanna Wilson who doubles as her mom, added “So, we went down and Madison met the panel and kind of just sold herself at that point. She spoke with the people, she drew a picture of [the female panel member]… We didn’t know initially that the panel was the president and the director of the program. We just thought that they were normal reps. Then when she started drawing the picture and talking they were overtaken by her personality at that point.”

One would be hard pressed to find an individual that this kid’s personality doesn’t overtake. The only girl in a family full of sports playing boys, the 10-year-old, tiara-sportin’ diva had to find a way to stick out. And that’s exactly what she did during the talent portion where she performed a dramatic poem in English, Chinese and to top it all off she sang in German at the end! Though this is a great way to display such wonderful talent, CP2 was curious to know what made the girls go for a pageant as their outlet giving the amount of bad PR they oftentimes get.

“Before I signed up I went on their website to check them out,” Marie said of her background check on the pageant long before they even had the chance to check her out. “I liked their mission statement and everything. It started back in the 1950s when there was a lot of segregation and everything going on but now I feel like it’s relevant for Black women to still have a sense of pride and self worth. All we see on TV are the video girls and the girls in the media, but they don’t show everyday real Black women accomplishing goals, graduating college, being positive and doing things with their lives. So that’s why I joined to be that role model and say, ‘Hey, we are out here!’”

As one of those aspiring women, Madison also explained her reasoning saying, “I wanted to be in a pageant because it sets a goal for all the little girls who want to become what they want to be. And, it can also let you know that if you put your mind to it you can accomplish your goals.” Madison’s mom also gave feedback in response to the question of having fear that her daughter would develop into one of the cast members of the TLC show “Toddlers & Tiaras.” “My reasons for having her involved in the pageant were for us to have her develop her self esteem, to assist her with her public speaking skills, for confidence and healthy competitiveness. So we just thought it would be a good thing for her because we’re in the Shaker Heights Community and there aren’t a lot of positive things going on that promote African-American girls. I thought it was a big accomplishment for her amongst her peers to hold a prestigious title like Little Miss Black America and she’s strong enough to not let it go to her head.”

Marie added, “Plus, my mom thinks I’m her princess so she thinks I should be in everything. I wasn’t interested at first. Then, it became fun. And I’m the type of person who, if I start something, I have to finish it.”

All this talk about competitiveness and finishing what you started prompted the next question from the behind the scenes take… Did it get catty? Marie was eager to answer and said, “You know what?... The Cleveland girls, we have developed a sisterhood. We still keep in contact with each other; we still encourage each other, regardless of whatever the outcome was. When we brought in a girl from Dayton and one girl from Columbus, it got kinda… messy. Just because, we had been there for almost a year practicing, rehearsing our talents, everything. And then they came on. [Sigh] Mixing their personalities… They just should have been there from day one. Then… someone wiped their face on one of my dresses before I went on stage! It’s actually at the cleaners now.”

So, what does a contestant do when it’s clear that complete sabotage is in play? In true beauty queen fashion, you roll with the punches and look good doing it.

“Well, the other girls were wearing their contestant numbers on their side and I had a big ole make-up spot in the front of my dress so I just had to wear mine down here (points to lower mid-area of her dress). I tried to get it out real quick and the hairstylist was blowing it dry backstage but it wouldn’t come out. So, I just had to put my contestant number in the front and get out there.”

Madison had a similar situation when it came to the Cleveland camaraderie, and admits that the

Columbus kid initially didn't fit the mold. "When it was just me and the other Cleveland girl it was all cool. Then this Columbus girl came in, it was fine but she was just really shy and didn't talk much… But once she finally came out of her shell, we all had fun."

And the fun is just beginning for the winners who took home a slew of prizes including spa packages, Macy's gift cards, cosmetic gift baskets, arts classes at Karamu Theatre, a chance to compete in Florida for the national Miss Black America competition and more. The three are currently publicizing their pageant wins by appearing at various community festivals and other events. If you are interested in having them make an appearance e-mail mpayden@yahoo.com or call (216) 440.3007.