

New Miss Black USA says she's no 'Pageant Girl'

Written by Pharaoh Martin, NNPA National Correspondent
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) - Even after they announced her name and proclaimed Miss Pennsylvania as the new Miss Black USA, Shayna Rudd didn't realize that she had just won. It wasn't until her pageant roommate Miss Black Alabama squeezed her hand really, really tight that it finally sunk in that she was the 2009 title holder.

"It was really surprising because all of the ladies were so fabulous," Rudd says about her big win at the University of District of Columbia Theater on Aug. 3. "I have gotten to the point of the competition where I wasn't worried about winning. I was just worried about doing my very best because it was my last pageant. So, I just wanted to have a good time."

Rudd stepped ahead of the line in her shimmery pink evening gown to be awarded her crown, bouquet of red roses and a sash that dawned her new title while the 14 other finalists stood behind in stilettos as a well manicured backdrop. They maintained their well practiced smiles in spite of some disappointment but – after the four hours of fitness, talent, evening gown and spontaneous question competitions - they appeared relieved and happy for new title holder.

The 22nd Annual Miss Black USA Pageant, which was hosted by actor Lamman Ricker and

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1994 Miss Black USA Deya Smith, featured a prolific judging panel that ranged from Dr. Ian Smith of Celebrity Fit Club fame to the Washington Mystics' Nakia Sanford and Terri Stevens, designer from Project Runway's season 5, who told Rudd that she was her pick because she was "real"

"She said, 'When you walked out on stage you was you,'" Rudd recalls Stevens telling her. "You wasn't trying to be all 'pageanty'. You wasn't trying to give too much. You just gave us you - and that's why you was the pick for me."

As the new Miss Black USA, Rudd won a bevy of prizes that included a \$5,000 wardrobe from Stevens, cash scholarships, a year's worth of make up from African-American cosmetics company Black Opal, where she will also serve as a spokesperson, and an expense paid trip to Ghana, among many other prizes.

For the next year, Rudd will be the face of the organization on a whirlwind of public appearances until she relinquishes her title to the next year's Miss Black USA.

Rudd's motivation to compete in Miss Black America came from her experience of being one of the very few African-American women to compete in the more mainstream Miss America pageant in 2008. She was the reigning Miss DC, a title she won while a student at Howard University. It's an experience she described as both wonderful and daunting.

"I was told that one of the reasons that I didn't do well was because I was too powerful and that I spoke with too much conviction," she remembers. "And that would've been fine if I did Miss Black USA but that wasn't going to work with Miss America." That comment stuck with her.

Her quick ascent to the Miss America competition in Las Vegas in 2008 gave her a bit of a confessed ego - just briefly because she was swiftly humbled when she failed to place in the esteemed national pageant.

Somebody recommended that Rudd look into Miss Black USA, and that's just what the 23-year-old Philadelphia native did.

"I just decided that I was going to do it for me because my previous pageant experiences really tested my sincerity and my consistency as a Black woman."

Win, lose or draw Rudd just wanted to prove it to herself that she could do it.

So was Shayna Rudd too Black for Miss America?

"I'm not gonna put that on Miss America because Miss America didn't say it," she laments.

"Someone affiliated with the organization said that I spoke too powerful. I can't apologize for the gift God gave me. I feel like here I can use my authoritative voice. I couldn't use it at Miss America but I could with Miss Black USA. Now, I'm Miss Black USA so it works out."

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She says she doesn't need Miss America to validate her.

"I'm the kind of Black woman that wakes up every morning and loves to be Black," Rudd says proudly. "So it wasn't for me, but I can't say that it's not for every Black woman."

With the exception of falling short in Las Vegas, Rudd has won every high-profile pageant she's competed in. She was even named Miss Howard University as a college student.

Beyond her success as a pageant queen Rudd's personal background is very humbling. She describes herself as a Philly girl through and through. Rudd comes from a single parent home. Her mom held the house together working multiple jobs while she knew her father was hooked on drugs most of her life. Her modest beginnings prompted her call to serve and deliver broken women and other under-served people.

"I'm just a freedom fighter, man," the Teach for America educator says. "I work in Southeast DC with students at the lowest performing school in the District of Columbia. It's the most poverty stricken with the most issues. That's where the movement is. That's my heartbeat. My heart beat is in streets and with the kids."

In addition to her teaching work, Rudd owns the Lady Diva Corporation, a non-profit organization she founded in 2005 that empowers impoverished young ladies ages 14-20 in Washington, DC and Philadelphia.

"I couldn't get away from it," says the self-described free spirit of her call to service. "Some young girl on campus would always come up to me for advice. It was God's way of showing me where I needed to be."

At the end of the day, the self-described free spirit shares that her character, her integrity and her dedication to service are more important than crowns and sashays.

"I'm by no means a pageant girl. You would look at me and be like, 'Miss Black who?'" she says. "I don't do the diamonds or the glimmer. All of that is nice but the meaning behind it all is what draws me in."