A Delicate Bully Pulpit

As Miss America, Leanza Cornett went where no activist had gone before

May 1, 1997 By Dominic Hamilton-Little

Originally from Florida, Leanza Cornett was crowned Miss America 1993. She brought no small amount of attention to herself, and the pageant, with her choice of AIDS awareness as her community-service platform. In an arena considered by many to be unduly frivolous and superficial, Leanza brought reality and beauty together in a remarkable way. We discussed what makes her world go 'round, from beauty and friends to red wine and other vices.

Dominic: Did you start the pageant circuit as a child?

Leanza: My first pageant was one of those social things that all of the junior girls did in high school in Jacksonville, Florida. I was third runner-up. I was drawn to the pageant circuit because, one, I was always in theater, and it was another chance to perform. And two, because you could win scholarships. I was very shocked when I won Miss Jacksonville. But it put me through school. When I placed third in the Miss Florida pageant that year, I thought: "If I do that well the first time, let me see how well I do the second time." Third time was the charm.

Why did you choose AIDS as your community-service platform?

One of the people I lived with in Orlando was Melvin--he owned a designer gown shop and was very active in the pageant. I'd come home from Disneyland where I worked, and I'd be like, "Oh my God, we have one more friend who's in the hospital." Melvin said, "Well, get involved, do something active."

Were the pageant organizers uncomfortable?

Florida is a very conservative state, even though they have this incredibly high AIDS caseload. The president of the organization warned me: "You know the press is going to go after you. It's enough to be competing for Miss America. Do you really want to add this on?" And I replied, "It's the only thing I know. So I would be a liar if I didn't say this was my platform." If I fell flat on my face because of their attitudes, that would be *their* fault, *their* issue.

But in the end, I got invited to speak about AIDS and raise awareness in places where other activists had not been able to go. A conservative, Southern Baptist church is not going to say:

“Hey ACT UP, come on and talk to us.” It was very important to me that I was able to reach people who had not yet been reached.

Who was the first friend you lost?

Guy Cardwell. We just clicked--he was a talented actor, young and very good-looking--and we would hang out. Go to dinner, go to plays, and he would come to Disney where I was working, and we’d play in the park.

Then one day he asked if I could drive him to the doctor. At this point, he was starting to get sick, KS and that sort of thing. I was very nervous. I remember sitting in the doctor’s office, and they were going to burn off, or freeze, some of the lesions. This wonderful doctor was just very candid about what was going to happen. I couldn’t hold it together. Excusing myself, I found a pay phone and called my mom, and burst into tears. I mean, this was my friend, and we were so young. My mom said: “If you can’t handle it, then he doesn’t need you to be there, because he needs you to be strong. If you’re not a big enough girl, then he needs somebody else in his corner.” Which amazed me; I’d never heard my mom talk like that. So I went back. I could always just go home and bawl my eyes out, but Guy had to live with it. He died in February of 1994.

Miss America, do you think you’re beautiful?

Yea, I mean, I give a lot and I’m a good wife and that’s very important to me. And I’m a good daughter to my parents. I know I have flows, and certainly vices. Many of them, in fact.

Tell us about a couple.

I’m sure we’ll go there. But I do think I’m a good person, and that makes me a beautiful person, and I attend to my physical self. I’m proud of me when I look in the mirror, and I guess that accounts for something.

And the vices?

Junk food—which always means I have to exercise more. And red wine. I love red wine. And going dancing.

So tell me: What is beauty?

I could probably give you a really cliché answer and say, “It comes from within”—and I do think there’s merit to that—but I think, especially in the society we live in, beauty has to do with taking care of yourself and being as happy as you can be—in spite of whatever odds you’re facing.

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