Life’s Rich Pageant

Straight “positoid” Shawn Decker explains his passion for beauty pageants—and his angst over anti-gay contestants.

November 1, 2008 By Shawn Decker

Many a straight “positoid” (my term for someone who is HIV positive) has stayed in his AIDS closet for fear of being perceived as gay. Having been diagnosed as a hemophiliac virgin in the sixth grade—albeit with an impressive hetero-dating record under my elementary school belt—I never worried about whom my peers thought I was wet-dreaming about. Thankfully, by my early adulthood, I found the divisiveness surrounding sexual orientation laughable.

On one recent occasion, I discovered that people were still questioning my sexual orientation. Ironically this time, it was not because of my HIV status, but rather because I was an extremely well-kept young man in a fashionable button-down shirt who was attending a *beauty pageant*.

Over the past 10 years, I’ve been to more than 30 pageants, including Miss America. I’ve judged a few pageants in my home state of Virginia and have helped coach girls on everything from interview techniques to what type of earrings best accessorizes a two-piece bathing suit. How did this happen to a young boy who so loved his G.I. Joe action figures?

In 1999—around the same time as my AIDS diagnosis—I fell in love with Gwenn, now my wife-partner. Back then, she competed in pageants to help pay for student loans while crushing the dreams of her crown-obsessed competitors. I was so enthralled with this new world that I hardly noticed I was dying. Twenty pounds underweight, I watched girls talk about eating disorders and charitable concerns such as taking care of the elderly’s pets.

All I knew was that I liked to watch Gwenn on stage in an evening gown, I wanted to grow old with her, and I wanted a dog.

Thanks to the trust I’d earned from pageant organizers because I was a regular pageant attendee—and thanks to my history as an HIV educator and public speaker—in 2007 I was offered the greatest of honors: to cohost a pageant with Miss Virginia 2005, Kristi Glakas. I cracked my jokes, read my lines and was thrilled when, from the stage, Kristi plugged my memoir, *My Pet Virus*. Perhaps her kind words had something to do with the fact that an entire chapter is dedicated to these glorious spectacles (but still, you can see why I love pageant girls).

Despite my adoration, I no longer enjoy the naked beauty of the sentiments expressed onstage because I can no longer ignore the seedy underworld of pageants: conservative girls.

It all starts out innocent enough. They hone their expertise doing whatever it takes to win a crown. They soak it all in, practice subtle pageant moves in private, bond with their coaches and then take all that skill and know-how with them as they strut across a brightly lit stage in swimsuits. So far, so good. I love it. But then they exit stage right and into the real world, where they invariably end up in a voting booth. While there, I suspect many of them push buttons with their well-manicured hands that deny the basic human rights of their strongest supporters (gay fans) as they elect homophobic government officials in one of the worst gay-bashing states in America: Virginia.

Saddened by politically conservative participants who desashed my joy for pageantry, I turned to the newly crowned Miss New York, Leigh-Taylor Smith, who grew up and competed in Virginia for many years and has traveled to South Africa to educate teens about HIV. She even helped raise money for positoids last spring by participating in the AIDS Walk New York.

“My parents always emphasized the importance in treating all of those around me equally,” said Leigh-Taylor, “and I certainly never want to be judged for who I fall in love with.” She continued, reminiscing about all the help she’s received over the years from gay men, including late-night phone calls laden with advice that went well beyond the four phases of competition.

“At the end of the day, why judge?” pondered Miss New York before wrapping up the sentiment like a pro. “That’s for swimsuit and opening number sequins, not gay men.”

Virginia misses you, Leigh-Taylor.

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