How Lola Got What She Wanted

Since winning a drag pageant last year, Lola has worked as an advocate all over the country and become an inspiring face of HIV in the process.

June 14, 2019 By Caroline Tien

If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. A year ago, on June 1, 2018, drag queen Lola became the (expertly contoured) face of that familiar maxim when she placed first in Palm Springs, California's Queen of the Desert pageant after vying unsuccessfully for the honor three times before. Though she has since surrendered her crown to Anya, who won the 2019 pageant, Lola's brief reign saw her become the only Queen of the Desert ever to receive a certificate of recognition from Palm Springs Mayor Robert Moon for her work.

"I guess I'm doing something right!" she said, tongue-in-cheek, in a phone interview.

Palm Springs Mayor Robert Moon and hosts Jeffrey Ewell and Brian Wanzek pose with Lola after she is presented with a certificate of recognition from the cityDesert AIDS Project

A Long Island native, Lola—who in everyday life goes by her birth name Michael or the nickname Miki—was diagnosed with HIV 10 years ago. It was a devastating revelation whose blow, by her own admission, was compounded by a preexisting alcohol use disorder.

“I couldn’t really deal with being HIV positive,” she said candidly. “I refused to go to the doctor; I refused to get on meds; and, mostly because of the alcohol, you know, I just wanted to drink and not be responsible and grow up.”

Had it not been for her HIV status, however, she might never have competed in the Queen of the Desert—or even learned of its existence. In 2014, urged on by her mother, Lola sought help from the Palm Springs organization behind the pageant, Desert AIDS Project (DAP), which provides antiretroviral medication free of charge to people living with HIV who qualify. Founded in 1984, at the height of the AIDS crisis, by a group of dedicated community volunteers, DAP has been the Coachella Valley's primary not-for-profit resource for those living with, affected by or at-risk for HIV/AIDS for over three decades.

"DAP has always taken really good care of me as a client," Lola said. "There's no way I would be able to afford my HIV meds without DAP. And I wanted to make my doctors proud. I wanted to make David Brinkman, the CEO of DAP, proud. I really wanted to represent Palm Springs and our community."

Hence her decision to enter the 2nd Annual Queen of the Desert, which was originally conceived as a fundraiser for DAP, in 2015. Held every spring at the Palm Springs Cultural Center, the pageant is a RuPaul's Drag Race–esque lip-synch competition featuring swimsuit, talent and eveningwear rounds. The prospect of watching statuesque queens strut their stuff in everything from bikinis to cocktail dresses has proved irresistible to the wider Palm Springs community, with tickets selling out within days of going on sale.

Lola's final performance as Queen of the DesertDesert AIDS Project

Lola, who has been doing drag since eighth grade, was disappointed when she didn't win that year, or the next, or the next. But what kept her going, in large part, was the knowledge that she was a fan favorite.

“I always won Best Bathing Suit or Best Evening Gown or something like that,” she said, a hint of humor in her voice, “so even though I didn’t win the crown and even though I might not have been the most talented, I knew I was the prettiest.”

Her eventual victory was made all the sweeter by the fact that she had striven for it for so long. Even Steven Henke, DAP’s director of community development, admitted that he and his colleagues “cried tears of joy” during her poignant acceptance speech about becoming a client of DAP.

“Watching Lola live her life authentically affirms the work we do in this community,” Henke—who, inspired by Lola, recently wore a pair of hot-pink high heels to an interview with NBC Palm Springs’ Bryan Gallo—wrote in an email. “We, along with the entire community, were [moved] by her progress, hard work and commitment to giving back to Desert AIDS Project.”

For Lola, giving back to DAP as Queen of the Desert 2018 meant traveling to countless HIV-awareness and gay pride events throughout the United States.

“I actually got to lead the AIDS Walk, and that was very meaningful,” she said, referring to the annual Palm Springs walkathon founded in 1986 to combat the HIV epidemic. And when she visited Vancouver last August, she was even asked to carry the American flag in the city’s gay pride parade. “That was such an honor!” she recalled.

Lola at the Palm Springs AIDS WalkDesert AIDS Project

But she never got carried away by the glitz and glamour of her jet-setting lifestyle. Her core mission as Queen of the Desert 2018 was, and remains, to “help raise money and share awareness with people and, also, try to get rid of the stigma people have against HIV/AIDS even today in our gay community.”

“You go on Grindr [a popular gay dating app],” she says, “and you should hear some of the stuff that people write—‘clean people only,’ things like that. It’s really weird to see that in this day and age.”

It’s this keen sense of social justice that earned Lola the admiration of Mayor Moon. In his speech at the 2019 Queen of the Desert (to which Lola wore a custom-made dress with a portrait of herself painted on the skirt), he surprised her with a framed certificate honoring her “firm commitment to social equality and compassionate care.”

“Presented to Miki Strauss,” it reads, “who, as his drag persona Lola, spent the last 12 months wearing the Queen of the Desert crown and sash proudly to represent the mission of Desert AIDS Project and the City of Palm Springs at countless events across the United States…. For your ongoing support of compassionate care at DAP, the community thanks you!”

Lola, tearing up, gladly accepted the honor. But Henke, for one, thinks her lasting legacy won’t be her status as the first Queen of the Desert to earn a certificate of recognition from a local politician, but rather her ability to “reach into an audience and see that one person who’s not feeling ‘part of,’ that might be feeling alone or sad, and just pull them into community.”

“That’s kind of Lola’s superpower,” he said in another interview with NBC Palm Springs, this time with anchors Joe Smith and Thalia Hayden. “That’s what she’s done all over the country.”

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