Miss Red Ribbon 2013

A drag pageant raises funds to fight HIV/AIDS in Charlottesville, Virginia.

July 1, 2013 By Shawn Decker

With headlines erroneously blaring that a cure for HIV is "within months," many AIDS service organizations (ASOs) in the United States are finding they need to get creative with their fundraising strategies.

Recently, I had the privilege of attending one such event in Charlottesville, Virginia—the second annual Miss Red Ribbon Pageant. I caught up with a few of the major players, performers and organizers of the event.

Nevaeh Symone, Tara Wheeler (a former Miss Virginia and host of the pageant), Max Dean and Reigna Beaux

Questions for Jason Elliott, who by day is the program recruitment specialist for AIDS Services Group (ASG), the local ASO, and who by night is Reigna Beaux, first runner-up at Miss Red Ribbon 2012 and drag queen extraordinaire:

Why is a drag pageant and an HIV/AIDS fundraiser such a good fit?

There are so many things that just naturally go together: peanut butter and jelly, summertime and sunburns, Thanksgiving and overeating, and of course, drag pageants and the HIV/AIDS community!

Before it became as popular and appreciated as it is today, drag was looked down upon. It was considered dirty, deplorable, unattractive, and generally something that hurt both the LGBTQ community and society in general. Drag performers were the outsiders. Who else has faced this idea of being “less than,” unclean and undesirable? The members of the HIV-positive community.

Early on, drag queens recognized this and rose to the challenge of being the first activists and fundraisers for those dying of AIDS. Over the years as the art form has developed, education has increased and treatment has improved, drag has continued to be a way to support and encourage those living with HIV.

So often, HIV/AIDS is associated with heaviness, hopelessness and a general sense of inapproachability. On the other hand, drag shows are thought of as uncontrollably fun, lighthearted and entertaining. So when these two communities come together, it creates a very intriguing atmosphere where something serious is made less intimidating by something entertaining.

How has the community in Charlottesville responded to this fundraiser?

Though Charlottesville is not one of the drag capitols of the world, this event has truly put us on the map. In the midst of many pageants for many causes, Miss Red Ribbon has stood out. We have contestants and performers who are local favorites right on stage beside national titleholders.

Then, there is the audience. Right next to the young man bringing his new girlfriend is the same-sex couple celebrating decades together. This year, there was even a little princess of about 6 years old who joined one of our veteran performers on stage for one of the closing numbers! So regardless of age, race, sexual orientation, or any other distinguisher, this show has something to offer to everyone.

That diversity is exactly why the community has embraced Miss Red Ribbon so strongly. It is as welcoming and entertaining for everyone.

Questions for Max Dean, the new Miss Red Ribbon 2013:

At the beginning of the pageant you had a nasty spill onstage but recovered like a pro. How did you manage to put that behind you and go on to win the title?

Putting things behind you is a lesson in life—you can’t dwell on the past; you have to keep it moving in a positive direction. Trust me when I tell you: The only thing I could do is laugh, get up and carry on!

What are you most looking forward to in the coming year in regard to your duties as Miss Red Ribbon 2013?

Working with ASG and talking with the community about what we can do better to serve them. ASG is a hard-working organization that continues to reach out and help anyone who needs it, and I want to be a part of that.

Questions for Nevaeh Symone, the outgoing Miss Red Ribbon 2012:

When you heard about the Miss Red Ribbon Pageant last year, what compelled you to enter?

I was at the initial meeting on the possibility of having the pageant. Being that I have been an impersonator for over 11 years now, and very strongly involved with ASG over that time period, I wanted the pageant to have a strong start.

Last year was my first year back to the Charlottesville competition since 2008, so I did go in feeling like an underdog only because I wasn't that familiar with the audience. However, from watching the audience approval from the moment I stepped on stage—it was very overwhelming.

Proudest moment as Miss Red Ribbon 2012?

My proudest moment would have to be something small. I could say the money raised during the AIDS walk or traveling and spreading the word. But my proudest moment would have to be being acknowledged by the patrons of ASG.

On a few occasions I would visit [them at] ASG as "Jonathan," but when I was introduced as "Miss Red Ribbon" their faces would light up. It made me so happy to know that people I had never met before knew who I was and that I had made a huge impact on their lives.

I believe that Miss Red Ribbon will continue to grow and be a very recognizable footprint of what an amazing community can do for others.

Photo by Martyn Kyle of Pernmoot Photography

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