Former Miss America and AIDS Advocate, Leanza Cornett, Dies At Age 49

October 29, 2020 By Shawn Decker

Tragically, Leanza Cornett, fell in her home earlier this month, and passed away on October 28. As Miss America 1993, Leanza used the crown to discuss safe sex and reduce the stigma faced by those living with HIV/AIDS.

Having entered pageants to help pay for college, Leanza's ascent in the world of swimsuits, heels and sashes was swift. After winning Miss Florida she earned the right to compete for the crown of crowns but, before doing so, she "needed a platform". Which is a fancy way of saying a cause. She received a little blow back after choosing HIV/AIDS due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Her pageant directors thought it would inhibit her chances of winning, but Leanza wouldn't budge. And the rest is not just pageant history, but a little piece of HIV/AIDS advocacy history as well.

From going into public schools to talk about condoms, to using her faith to advocate for people with HIV on the 700 Club, Leanza not only stood up for herself but also for the HIV/AIDS community. She drew shade from some of the Miss Americas that had come decades before her, who were aghast at the thought of a Miss America uttering the words "condom" and "sex". When she visited public schools that limited the scope of what she could talk about, she'd make sure there was a question and answer session with students, knowing that they'd help drive the discussion towards sex. As a Republican, Leanza was a vocal critic of President George H.W. Bush's response to the pandemic. Her goal, no matter where she went, was quite simple: if you weren't educated about HIV when she arrived, you certainly would be after hearing her speak.

The crown wears some people- but not Leanza Cornett. Her win paved the way for Kate Shindle, Miss America 1998, who was also a fearless champion for people living with HIV. And, like Leanza, Kate drew some shade from Miss Americas of the past, too. And, though we may be a bit removed from the heyday of pageants and the influence they once wielded, we should never forget Leanza's contributions to helping this country move forward in regard to its thinking on HIV/AIDS.

Positively Yours,
Shawn

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