

'Miss'-ing the point?

Beauty pageants: harmfully fickle or just a bit of fun?

Globe interviews Miss Photogenic, Tina Sawyer

Miss Gibraltar, the Rock's equivalent of beauty pageants held annually all over the world with just one aim: to find the most beautiful girl in the area. The passion and excitement emanating from such competitions can drive crowds into a frenzy, as regular attendees of the Miss Gibraltar pageant know only too well. Of course, with Gibraltar being the tight-knit community that it is, it's hardly surprising that the event is jam-packed with friends, family and the press every single year. 2010's spectacle was no different, with the Alameda Open Air Theatre filled to absolute capacity for the show on June 26.

Many view these events as superficial, materialistic, a reflection of how shallow we have become as a society, focusing on looks alone with little regard to integrity, personality or inner beauty. Some may say 'what lessons are we teaching the younger generation with competitions such as these?' To investigate this theory, and to shine a little light on the person behind the makeup, Globe Magazine caught up with the winner of this year's Miss Photogenic award, Tina Sawyer.

Tina, who turned 19 in November, was eager to emphasise that the Miss Gibraltar pageant wasn't something she pin-pointed and set out to take part in of her own accord. "I was at work and my boss suggested that I go for it. I naturally refused (I say naturally because I wouldn't usually do this whole beauty pageant thing!) but after some convincing from my boss and some friends I thought 'what's the worst that could happen?' and eventually signed up."

A lover of art and music, Tina found her nerves starting to get the better of her as the time grew near for her to take to the stage and embrace such an unfamiliar experience. "Once it hit about 6pm, loads of thoughts were running through my mind: 'Am I going to fall? What am I going to say in the interview? Am I going to look a fool standing next to the other girls?'. I even thought about backing out at one point but I couldn't let the girls and the team down."

After the on-stage introduction, Tina found her confidence and was surprised to find herself enjoying the experience. "It was a lot easier than I thought it would be, especially since I couldn't see the crowd as the lights were so bright! It was an incredible rush and I'm really happy I went through with it."

Tina's aim in taking part in the Miss Gibraltar pageant was to have fun, be herself and just get through it without making a fool of herself (a sentiment she undoubtedly shares with almost every Miss Gibraltar participant!), so when she was announced as Miss Photogenic, Tina was... "in shock! I mean me? Miss Photogenic? I've never thought of myself as an attractive person, let alone being named as Miss Photogenic."

Now many young women of Tina's age would have let that award go straight to her head. In pleasant contrast, Tina explained that her high-point was not that of superficial achievement and looks-based recognition. "I've never been into pageants, photo shoots and the public watching your every move. I just used to sit there with no interest in this sort of thing whatsoever. But it was an amazing experience. I had so much fun and I don't regret it at all. I'm so happy I shared it with the girls: they're all magnificent and unique in their own ways. They're ALL Miss Gibraltar to me."

Tina's participation in the pageant struck a chord it seems, with many girls approaching her to comment that she had proved that you don't have to be a 'girly girl' to make an impression in the competition, that she had proved the old-fashioned and materialistic pageant system wrong.

When asked if she planned to use her success to draw attention to any issues in particular, Tina responded in the words of a smart young woman: "There's only one message I really want everyone to pay attention to, mostly the young girls in Gibraltar: if you really feel you aren't pretty or good enough for someone, take the time to think about all the good you've done. There are a lot more important things in life than your looks. We all end up the same: old and wrinkly (no offence!). The one thing that sticks by you is you, not your looks."

While many people are encouraging her to take part in next year's competition, Tina admits she'd prefer to leave it for the time being. "I think the smart thing to do would be to wait a couple of years, develop more, grow more as a person and as a woman and then think about it. But you never know!"

As for any advice Tina has for those wanting to follow in her footsteps, she says, "The only thing I went by was keeping true to myself. A lot of people let it get to their head and just become lost. Just be you, be happy with you."

The old ideals of beauty pageants still exist, with the main aim being the pursuit of the most beautiful contestant, an obviously fickle and materialistic moral to be instilling in such a young and highly impressionable group of people. However, as thrilling and ego-boosting as it may be, today's participants of competitions such as Miss Gibraltar recognise that it is more an enjoyable and fun experience that also serves as a channel through which they can focus attention on much more important issues.

It is a relief in a way to see that young woman such as Tina aren't losing sight of what's important in life, rather than allowing themselves to become too wrapped up in physical appearance. Competitions such as Miss Gibraltar run the risk of instilling such false ideals into the minds of young girls and it's nice to see that while Tina has enjoyed the thrill that taking part in the pageant has brought her, she hasn't let it negatively affect her obviously strong and positive personal morals.

Well done Tina!

Tina wishes to thank: "everyone who came to the show in support, mum, dad, Brandon, Neil, my nan, my aunt, Garry, Rich and Jay."

Sarah McIver