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Jacquie Brown
Miss Washington



Miss Washington Jacquie Brown answers on-stage questions during Miss America preliminaries.

Homeless as a child, Vancouver's Jacquie Brown will vie for Miss America crown Saturday

Jacquie Brown of Vancouver is introduced as Miss Washington during preliminary contests at the Miss America competition in Las Vegas.

Photos courtesy of Allen Dye

A challenging path to pageant

By COURTNEY SHERWOOD
Columbian staff writer

As a homeless child, Jacquie Brown worried more about where she'd rest her head at night than how to do her hair. As a 16-year-old seeking legal emancipation from her mother, she aimed to impress the judge with her good grades and budgeting skills, not her singing voice or fashion choices.

But when she's introduced to American TV viewers Saturday night, her hair, her voice and her poise in an evening gown will all be center stage. So, she hopes, will her personal story.

Brown is the first Clark County resident to become Miss Washington in 20 years. Local friends, family and pageant boosters believe she has the potential to go even further, to win a \$50,000 academic scholarship and beat 51 other women in the quest for Miss America's tiara.

"I've been very touched by Jacquie, because she's real and she got there on her own," said Lois Elaine Smith-Zoll of Vancouver, who has been active as a judge, coach and fan of the pageant world for more than four decades. "I think this girl's going to do well."

Brown was also upbeat early in the week of competition, which began Monday and culminates with final judgments beginning at 9 p.m.

Saturday on KATU Channel 2.

Though she'd studied current events and a wide range of subjects in preparation for her behind-the-scenes interview with judges, their questions all focused on her life story and her public service advocacy or mentorship programs. Mentors played a key role in Brown's own development, beginning when she was 13.

"I didn't want to live this life anymore, where I was in poverty, in homelessness, being constantly told I was worthless," she said. So she started attending a church youth group, auditioning for parts in musicals, and seeking stable adult mentors through after-school programs.

Those new relationships helped Brown develop a sense of self-worth and focus, and within a few years she was volunteering to mentor younger students.

At age 16, she spoke to group of middle-schoolers about her personal struggles.

"A girl approached me afterward," Brown recalled. "She said that because I was able to get through abuse, she wanted to tell me something she had never told anyone. Her uncle had abused her. I was in awe that my story had that power."

Brown helped that girl connect to counselors

ON TV

■ "The Miss America Pageant,"
9 p.m. Saturday, KATU Channel 2.

and other resources, and she continued telling her story, hoping to make a difference.

Great opportunity

By that point in her life, Brown was working as a waitress to support herself, buy her meals and pay her rent, all while attending Evergreen High School.

In 2007, at age 17, she entered her first pageant — and at the same time, entered an unfamiliar world. She placed third runner-up, and she was hooked.

"A lot of people think pageants put women back in time and limit them," Brown said. "I don't think so. They give opportunities to women. Miss America has given me so much money for school — I wouldn't be able to afford college if it wasn't for the pageant, or I'd be extremely in debt. And I'm not in debt."

She entered several more pageants in the years that followed, and in October 2009 was named Miss Greater Vancouver, receiving a \$1,250 academic scholarship to fund her studies at Clark College. That victory gained her entry to the

Pageant:

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Miss Washington competition, which she won in July 2010, bringing her total scholarship award to nearly \$15,000.

Her schooling is on hold while she serves as Miss Washington; if Brown is named Miss America, she'll extend that academic leave until next year's pageant (and will receive another \$50,000 to pay for school).

She dreams of ultimately earning a degree at the University of Washington in Seattle, then pursuing a career in broadcasting.

By the time she walks on stage Saturday night and her image is transmitted to homes around the country, the judges

will have already scored Brown on a range of metrics, including her talent (singing), an interview, her poise in an evening gown (by Jovani Couture), and the respect she has won from other contenders.

At the same time as the rest of America, she'll learn whether she's made it to the top 15 and, if she does, she'll then learn on live TV how much further her pageant dreams will go.

Brown wants to win, but even if she heads home without the tiara, she said she'll be grateful for her role in the pageant.

"Who would have thought that a girl who was homeless and told that she was worthless would have a chance to compete in the 90th Miss America?" she said. "This week, I have to be proud of myself and thankful for everything I have."