

Taking on the Miss & Teen Latina New York Pageant By Lauren J. Rivera



On May 7th, 2005, my idea of socially approved beauty was completely altered. Like many others, I have images of anorexic, shapeless women as the ideal for beauty and modeling. However, my participation in the 2005 Miss and Teen Latina NY pageant changed all that.

While there was no way my klutzy self would be found anywhere near a stage in stilettos, I was more than happy to accept an invitation to act as a judge for the pageant on behalf of Mija Magazine. The pageant, now in its fourth year under the direction of Clarissa Santiago, is a mixture of demonstrating both beauty and charisma within the New York Latina community.

The finalists fell into two categories; Teen Latina NY, an age group of 14-16, and Miss Latina, an age group of 19-27. In months prior to the pageant, contestants from all over New York had auditioned for talent scouts and preliminary directors in order to move on to the finals. In the end there were only three in the Teen category and six in the Miss. It would be these beautiful women that would

grace the stage before me on the night of the pageant. As I was prepped along with the other judges, and given a binder full of profiles for each contestant, I wondered how hard of a feat choosing the winner would be. From their profiles, containing questions answered by each contestant, the women came across as a group of creative and intelligent individuals, some of the best New York has to offer. Before we left the prep room I was already aware of how tough the decision would be.

Eight o' clock came along with a dim of lights, a boost of beats and me sipping some complimentary (to the judges) Alize, hoping to take the edge off my nervousness. All eyes were on the stage as a parade of Latinas, lead by last year's Miss Latina NY winner Natalia Bonilla, danced and shook their bums through an opening performance dressed in pink shirts, short shorts and trucker's hats looking hot. Some were thin, some were thick, but all were beautiful in so many unique ways that I became ever more certain the outcome of the pageant was not going to come easy.

As each young woman introduced herself it became clear that the contestants may have all been New Yorkers, but their roots lied deep within countries all over the Caribbean and South America. Shortly after the introductions the show was handed over to the night's emcees, Misu, a gorgeous multi-talented performer and model, and Carlos "Los" Peguero, manager of the **Amount Boyz**. The charismatic and entertaining duo guided the night through the contestants' modeling of various swimwear. I have never seen a group of women wear swimsuits so nobly and look so comfortable in their own skin. I can only hope to have a fraction of that confidence as I head to the beaches this summer (Ayi Dios Mio!)

A break in the parade of swimwear came in the form of a performance by Misu. Not only is the twenty-five year old, Puerto Rican beautiful, she can sing *and* perform reggaeton. Move over Ivy Queen! Soon to follow was another performance, this time by the Amount Boyz who pop and locked their way across the stage and broke into an all out dancing frenzy. Sure you've

seen them perform on BET, MTV and in various videos and films like *Honey*, but seeing this group of young men is something so unbelievable that afterwards I was dying to sign up for the dance classes they teach at the Broadway Dance Center in NYC. I was so impressed with both Misu and the Amount Boyz, that I believe you'll hear much more about them in upcoming issues of Mija (*wink*).

With the adrenaline rush I was experiencing from all the singing and hot dance moves, I wasn't sure if I could stand the excitement of voting for the winners. Once again the finalists returned to the stage adorned in elegant gowns made by Puerto Rican designer Lilliam Landrón. Each woman was breathtaking, and I made a special note to see Lilliam about designing a dress that could make my disproportional body look that fabulous. They paraded in front of the audience with the ease of graceful swans and I wondered how it was possible not to flinch in four-inch heels, but these women were amazing.

While we, the judges, began deliberation as to which of the three Miss Latina NY finalists would be going to the final round, Clarissa Santiago, the pageant director and owner of Ideal Entertainment Company, shared her own experience. Another beautiful Puerto Rican woman, Clarissa was a top ten finalist in 2001 for the Miss Latina USA Pageant and later became the director of the NY pageant in the same year. With proud tears in her eyes, Clarissa looked over the pageant finalists and then thanked several women who acted as mothers to the pageant, including her own. Also acknowledged was Zulia Jowery, owner of Glamour Boutique in Ozone Park, New York, who was not only a judge, but also the stylist for all the contestants during their individual photo shoots.

Finally the acknowledgements were finished and it was time for me and the other judges to come to terms with the fact that we had a decision to make whether we liked it or not. Based on their choice of dress, the way they carried themselves and the way they had introduced themselves, we chose three of the women to move on to the final round. The chosen three for the Miss Latina NY title were Carmen Estremera, Sarah Hasbun, and Melissa Quesada. The finalists for the Teen Latina NY title were Glenis Hunter, Helena Garcia and Cristina Lebron. As the women hugged each other in excitement, and the stage was left with only the six finalists, it became obvious that the votes were going to be close in number. Each woman was beautiful in her own way, charismatic and more than worthy of the opportunity, but it would be the interview segment that would determine our choice.

Before us all six of the finalists answered questions ranging from "What do you plan to do with the opportunity winning the pageant will allow?" to "What did you think of the pageant director?" Ever answer was unique and thorough, but there could only be one winner for each age group. After what felt like an eternity, the judges finally submitted their ballots after pondering over the possibilities. Camille Mangual, Teen Latina NY 2004, passed on her crown to the winner of the Teen Latina NY 2005 title, Glenis Hunter, a charming and delicate-featured sixteen-year-old student from Queens, New York who later told me, "I hope winning the pageant will give me the head start I need to understand the entertainment industry and also the strength and courage I'll need to make a difference in this world".

Winning the title of Miss Latina NY was Carmen Estremera, a twenty-seven year hair stylist whose beauty shone from both her obvious outer attractiveness, as well as her inner passion for poetry writing. Beyond the opportunities winning the pageant will allow her, Carmen says, "I would love to host a TV show for young Latin viewers that would bridge the gap between our past and our future." Our own Latina Oprah! There is no doubt in my mind that this girl has the talent to pursue her dreams.

It's amazing how you can experience something that lasts for hours, and yet when it's over you stand there and wish it could start all over again. The Miss and Teen Latina NY pageant was

just that kind of experience. It came together through the strenuous efforts of Clarissa's never-ending battle to direct the show, and continued marvelously through the elegance of its participants. No matter who takes on the titles next year, they will obviously have some huge (and pretty) shoes to fill. Until next year Mija's! Best of luck!

For any other info please feel free to contact Lauren Rivera at lriviera@mijamagazine.com