

An unusual journey to tiara

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GANSEVOORT - Mrs. New York answers the door of her Gansevoort home and, of course, she is attractive, but she may be a little overdressed for a casual interview in her kitchen.

She is wearing a long, flowing sun dress, heeled sandals and makeup. She has also made me brownies. Never in my 30 years of conducting interviews has anyone ever made me brownies. They look good, too.

Nicole Palmer, 33, introduces me to her daughters, 11-year-old Alyssa and 8-year-old Jordan, both of whom are dressed a little too fashionably to be just hanging out during summer vacation. And just when I'm about to buy into the notion that I have walked into the perfect house, in the perfect suburban neighborhood, with the perfect children and perfect wife, she admits that the pool is turning green because of algae.

We have established that Nicole Palmer's life is not perfect, even if you have a sash and crown.

For the next hour and a half, we watch Nicole the wife, teacher and the mother of two young girls wrestle with Nicole the beauty pageant contestant and the reigning Mrs. New York.

Each identity seems to be at odds with the other. My first question, and the one she is asked the most, is why she does it.

Her answer — "to better serve her community and work for her charities" — really does sound like the bottled and polished answer we've come to expect from Miss America contestants who claim their top priority is world peace.

Nicole seems to realize that, too.

If you were not aware, beauty pageants are surviving as a cottage industry. Being a beauty queen can be expensive. Just entering a pageant can cost \$500 or more. And that's before you buy the clothes.

If you never realized your dream as Miss America, you've got the rest of your life to chase Mrs. America.

Nicole's journey has followed that thread.

She started entering pageants when she was a freshman in high school. She was named Miss Poughkeepsie in 1992 and Miss Hudson Valley Teenager in 1993. There were many other pageants along the way but she lived her life, too, graduated from college, became a teacher, married her husband, Joe, and had the girls. She has been teaching in the Queensbury Elementary School for the past three years and will teach third grade this year.

But once the girls were back in school, she started thinking about competing again. She entered the Mrs. New York pageant in 2003, but didn't even crack the top 10 out of 28 contestants. It bothered her.

"It gets in your blood," said Nicole. "I enjoy it and am passionate about it. You get to wear these beautiful gowns and get up on stage in your bathing suit and 4-inch heels."

On one hand, you have the dedicated, professional elementary school teacher and on the other you have the beauty pageant contestant who loves to be looked at on stage.

Nicole seems to embrace the one thing — wearing a bathing suit in public — that most women fear.

So you ask the question again: Why does she do it?

She talks about the pageants as a performance that never gets old, about being in the spotlight.

She tells you that winning the Mrs. New York pageant evolved into her dream.

But here's the thing about these pageants — the conundrum if you will. You need to be attractive and you need to carry yourself well, but there is something else the judges are looking for that is an intangible, some bit of character that separates the winner from everyone else, beyond wanting world peace. Something that makes the contestant real and not just a pretty face.

Nicole may have found that in the emergency room at Saratoga Hospital two years ago.

It was there that she confronted her vanity and what was really important in her life.

She was visiting a friend's house with her two young daughters when she bent over

to pet their little dog. She had done it before. She had always been around dogs. It whirled around and sank its teeth into her upper lip.

They rushed Nicole to the hospital where her husband Joe met her. Her upper lip had nearly been torn off her face and the plastic surgeon was looking at a jigsaw puzzle of nerves and tissue.

As the doctor tried to do his work, Nicole was a whimpering mess, fretting over what she would look like. Would her smile be crooked? Would there be a scar? Would she ever be able to compete in a beauty pageant again?

"Four inches lower and you might not be alive," the doctor told her.

Nicole thought about her two daughters and husband and was quiet.

"Any other questions?" the doctor asked.

"No, we're good," Joe said.

So at the very moment when her dream was escaping, her beauty compromised, perhaps this was the piece of her that was missing as a person, and yes, as a contestant.

It took 100 stitches to close the wound, but maybe it made her whole in ways that can't be measured by a doctor's sutures.

During the Mrs. New York pageant in July, the judge asked about life lessons. She told him about the dog attack and the scar and the moment with Joe in the emergency room. She pointed to the scar to see if the judge could see it through the makeup.

She was sure of herself in that regard, of who she was and what was important. And she won.

She brings one photo to the kitchen table. It is not of her being crowned, but of her stitched lip. She points to her lip so you can see the scar, but it is invisible to you as well. Nicole will be going to Tucson in September to compete with 50 other women for the Mrs. America title. The finals will be televised on the Women's Entertainment network.

She tells you about the night she won and riding home in the car with Joe and wearing the crown in the car as a goof. She talks about how she and Joe joke about it and how she threatens to wear the crown and sash mowing the lawn or doing the dishes while asking Joe if he can get Mrs. America a drink.

"That's who I am," says Nicole, laughing as you try to figure out which Nicole you are talking to — the serious teacher or the vain beauty queen — and you realize they have merged seamlessly into this complete person and that was what the judges were looking for all along.

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