



Miss America Pageant Contestant Redefines What it Means to be Beautiful in 2011

Saturday, January 15, 2011

By [Jocelyn Rubin \(/jocelyn-rubin\)](#)

History will be made today on the 90th anniversary of the Miss America Pageant, as the first bald beauty queen takes the stage to vie for the coveted title of Miss America. In today's society, where a multi-billion dollar beauty industry thrives on the insecurities of young women, 22-year-old Kayla Martell is a shining example of how beauty is more than skin deep.



Martell suffers from Alopecia Areata, an autoimmune disease that causes hair loss on the scalp and on other areas of the body. According to the National Alopecia Areata Foundation, this condition affects more than 4.7 million people in the United States alone. Martell began to suffer from the disease at the age of 10, when her eyelashes began to fall out, followed by her eyebrows and finally the hair on her scalp. Despite growing up knowing that she was going to lose her hair, Martell says she was very confident and feelings of insecurity about her looks only came later in life, when she was 19 and competing in the Miss Delaware pageant.

Martell competed for the title of Miss Delaware five times before earning the crown in June of 2010. Three of those times she competed without wearing a wig. "A judge had made a comment to me that if I wanted to become Miss Delaware that I should consider wearing a wig," she said. "I had gone so many years without wearing a wig that it had come to the point where I was so comfortable and so confident just as I was, and

for him to suggest that I change something that was a big part of me, really it just hurt me deep inside, it broke me apart. I questioned things that I had never questioned before and I started to realize maybe I don't look as feminine as other girls because I don't have the long flowing locks behind my shoulder."

Yet despite that moment of uncertainty, Martell never lost sight of her dream to become Miss America, a goal that she has had since she was three years old. "I started competing initially for the scholarship money," she said. "I had always wanted to try to go to college out of state. That was always my goal, to be able to travel a bit, and I knew that with my family we could not afford to send me to college out of state, and I would be paying for my education for myself, so the minute I heard scholarship money, I came a runnin'."

But the journey had a lot of obstacles. Martell, a speech communications major at Marymount University, had been given a full scholarship to attend college. She was told that her scholarship would not be renewed and that winning Miss Delaware would also mean giving up her last year of a fully paid tuition. "It was a very, very difficult decision...", she said, "...it definitely took about two weeks for me to just sit and pray about it, talk to my family about it, and really think everything out. Being Miss Delaware is a once in a lifetime opportunity, being Miss America is a once in a lifetime opportunity, that I knew that I had always wanted, but also to be able to finish my degree without having any debt was something that is hard to pass up as well."

Martell has not yet completed her degree, but her official profile on the Miss America Organization website lists her scholastic ambition as obtaining a Master's degree in Speech Communications and her career ambition as becoming a broadcast journalist. She said she has a few semesters left to finish, but that completing her degree is something that is very important to her.

I was lucky enough to get to speak with Martell over the phone on Wednesday when she was already in Las Vegas preparing for the pageant where she will compete for the title of Miss America. We discussed her position as a beauty role model for young women and she said her main focus right now is to redefine the ideal of what it means to be beautiful.

"We call Miss America the ideal, and I think in 2011 we really need to figure out what that means," she said. "I think the ideal now is different than what it was years and years ago. The ideal now is just inner beauty, self confidence, and grace. Knowing that you're beautiful just as you are and being a gracious person and a warm person on the inside and out. I'm in a position where a lot of people think that I'm a beauty pageant contestant or a beauty queen and that I have to look flawless all the time and look like a doll, but it's so much more than that."

As for the beauty industry itself, Martell believes that things are looking up. "I think things are getting better with (the beauty industry)," she said. "Because for a while there we had models that were too thin; people in the media were too thin too, just ripping themselves apart, not taking good care of themselves, and just not setting good examples. I think we're on the road to a better future, a brighter future, especially with the Dove Campaign For Real Beauty and more stars out there coming out and talking about their stories of struggling with self image, body image."

Martell supports the role that beauty pageants have in defining that self image for girls as well. "I think that's why the Miss America Organization is still so relevant," she said. "Because what we focus on is

highlighting real young women who are intelligent and beautiful and philanthropic, just completely well rounded.”

In "The Price of Beauty" (<http://hercampus.com/school/maryland/price-beauty> (<http://hercampus.com/school/maryland/price-beauty>)), I asked students around campus whether they choose to play up one feature over another during their beauty routines and if they feel that they don't look as good as other women in a particular area. I questioned Martell as to whether she does the same thing, since she does not have any hair to style like other people do.

“When I was 11 years old, my mother let me get my first little makeup set and she taught me how to do eye shadow because everyone always said that my eyes were my brightest feature,” she said. “For me, that’s always been my thing, play up my eyes, play up my best features, and I don’t see anything wrong with that. If you have some insecurity, find that one thing about yourself that you love, that you know is one of your greatest features and work upon it, build upon it, and make that shine.”



I also asked how the other contestants reacted to her unique condition. “All the contestants have been so supportive, they treat me like the rest of the girls,” she said. “They don’t think anything of it. I’m not special because I have to bring extra hair with me and I get to ship my hair here, but that’s exactly how I would want it to be. My roommates and I joke around. Miss Idaho is my roommate, and we were joking that she is so jealous I can style my hair the night before and set it on the wig head and then wake up without any bed head.”

Since sharing her story, Martell has become a very prominent figure throughout the nation. She has been featured on many television news programs, talk shows and in a variety of magazine articles. She serves as an ambassador for the Children’s Miracle Network and will also represent the National Alopecia Areata Foundation at the Miss America Pageant. She was recently named one of Shape Magazine's Ten “Women

Who Will Shape the World,” as well as being recognized as one of the United States Junior Chamber’s “Ten Outstanding Young Americans (TOYA),” of 2010. According to the United States Junior Chamber’s official website, The TOYA , “...exists to recognize and honor ten Americans each year who exemplify the best attributes of the nation’s young people, aged 18 through 40,” and other famous recipients of the award include John F. Kennedy and even Elvis Presley.

Martell takes her position as a leader and a role model very seriously, and she said that she often receives messages from young girls seeking her advice. “This morning I checked my Facebook and I had a message from a girl in Holland who has Alopecia Areata, and she said that, today, she had decided after seeing my story that she wanted to take off her wig today,” she said. “She was going to go work and not wear her hair. And just knowing that a 23-year-old girl is willing to open up because of something that I said or something that I did, it just warms my heart and makes me feel like I’m really making a change, and not many people are blessed to be able to have that feeling. Girls will send me messages and ask me, ‘I’m having a really tough time, I’ve been teased in my school, what do I do?’ And that’s hard for me, because I want to fix the problem for them, but I can’t change the bullies’ mind; the only thing that I can do is help to change their confidence and help to work on their image and their self image.”

Interviews from Martell several months ago stated that she was not sure whether she would choose to wear her wig in the Miss America competition. She stated Wednesday, however, that she believes she will be wearing the wig during the finals on Saturday. “I hope that people know and trust that this is a decision that I thought long and hard about and I prayed about it,” she said. “And I knew that when I wore the wig I would still be representing what is important to me, whether I have hair on my head or not, and it’s just to me like wearing a very special accessory, something like a brand new pair of earrings or something, and I hope people can see that I’m proud of myself just as I am. I’m proud to be a woman without any hair, I’m proud of all the work that I’ve done and I’m so much more than that, and by wearing the wig we can take the focus off of one small part of me and focus on the big picture and why I can do the job of Miss America.”

During the final minutes of my interview with Martell, I asked her if she had any special messages for the women of the University of Maryland.

“Just trust in yourself, know that you’re perfect just as you are and never try to shift or change yourself to be someone you’re not because then you’re doing yourself an injustice,” she said. “Be yourself and love yourself as you are. I think it’s the greatest challenge and yet the greatest thing to conquer as well.”

Be sure to watch Martell and the other contestants compete in the Miss America Pageant finals tonight at 9 p.m. when the show is broadcast live from Las Vegas on ABC.

****UPDATE****

Miss Nebraska Teresa Scanlan was crowned Miss America 2011 last night, becoming the youngest Miss America ever at the age of 17. Although Martell did not take home the crown, she became only the third representative from Delaware to become a top 10 finalist in the pageant as the pick in the America's Choice category.

More in:

COMMENTS

[GREAT STORY!! \(/SCHOOL/MARYLAND/MISS-AMERICA-PAGEANT-CONTESTANT-REDEFINES-WHAT-IT-MEANS-BE-BEAUTIFUL-2011#COMMENT-6176\)](#)

I had heard about Miss Delaware, but this was the first story about her I've read. She's so awesome, we need more women like her!

Submitted by **Sarah** (<http://shadesofsarah.wordpress.com>) (not verified) on Tuesday, January 18, 2011.

Post new comment

Your name:

E-mail:

The content of this field is kept private and will not be shown publicly.

Homepage:

Subject:

Comment: *

- Web page addresses and e-mail addresses turn into links automatically.
- You may post PHP code. You should include `<?php ?>` tags.
- Lines and paragraphs break automatically.

[More information about formatting options \(/filter/tips\)](#)

CAPTCHA

Are you a real human? We hope so!



What code is in the image?: *

Enter the characters shown in the image.

By submitting this form, you accept the [Mollom privacy policy \(http://mollom.com/web-service-privacy-policy\)](http://mollom.com/web-service-privacy-policy).

