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Battling cancer, alopecia and ADHD: Mrs Singapore Pageant contestants find beauty in adversity



Mrs Singapore Pageant 2024 contestants (from left) Lillian Yeo, Liz Quinn and Josephine Wang. ST PHOTO, GAVIN FOO



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SINGAPORE – Hair is a woman's crowning glory, and perhaps particularly so for a beauty queen.

But for Ms Josephine Wang, a 40-year-old contestant in 2024's Mrs Singapore Pageant, her tresses – or lack thereof – have long been a source of insecurity and shame.

The housewife has suffered from alopecia, a condition in which the immune system attacks hair follicles and causes hair loss, since she was nine.

Her bald patches gave her low self-esteem, and she was mocked by hairdressers and bullied in school.

She recalls: "Kids would come up to me to say, 'My mummy tells me I can't play with you or else I'll go botak (bald) like you too.' It got to a point where teachers asked me to wear a hat to school, but kids used to knock the hat off my head too."

But at 40, Ms Wang is done feeling ashamed. While she relied on hairstyling and make-up to cover up her bald spots during the pageant's talent show segment held

on April 27, she did not put on a wig for it. After all, her lifelong battle with alopecia is what gave her the courage to sign up for her first beauty pageant experience, after she saw a call for applications on Instagram in February.

“It’s transformative for me because I feel like although the things I go through aren’t the prettiest, if I take this platform and stand on it, it might empower other women who are struggling with the same condition... that things aren’t so bad, and you can still pursue your passions,” says the former nurse and flight attendant, who has been married for seven years to a 43-year-old project manager. The couple have no children.



Mrs Singapore Pageant 2024 contestant Josephine Wang has battled alopecia since she was nine. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

Ms Wang is one of 11 contestants of Mrs Singapore Pageant for women aged 25 to 45. There are another 11 contestants in the Classic Mrs Singapore category for women aged 46 to 65.

The finals will be held at Orchid Country Club on May 11. The pageant is also a fund-raising event and managed to raise more than \$55,000 for non-profit charity organisation Care Corner Singapore.

Three winners will be selected from each category to represent Singapore at three separate upcoming international pageants – Mrs Universe, Mrs Globe and Mrs Planet.

Ms Angela Tay, national director of ERM Singapore, which organises the pageants here, says that while the competitions began as a way to highlight and empower married women and mothers, it has gradually, particularly in the past five years, become a platform for women to share stories of adversity they have overcome.

She tells The Straits Times: “Women have always battled adversity, but perhaps they are now much more vocal and willing to talk about what happened to them, to empower and encourage other women.”





For Classic Mrs Singapore Pageant 2024 contestant Liz Quinn, who has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, the competition was a step out of her comfort zone. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

For Ms Liz Quinn, who turns 46 in December and is one of the Classic Mrs Singapore contestants, taking part in the pageant saw her step out of her comfort zone.

The actress, model and presenter, who also runs her own production company, is on the autism spectrum and has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). As part of their journey, the contestants have to visit and interact with pageant sponsors, such as beauty treatment clinics.

She says: "Honestly, there were times I really wanted to give up. While everyone else was chatting and interacting, I was in the corner by myself because socialising is really difficult for me. I also get burnt out from 'masking' so much and pretending to be okay. But Angela encouraged me to keep going, and I pulled through."

Masking is when individuals who are autistic or neurodivergent make an effort to mimic neurotypical behaviours to meet social expectations and blend into society.

Ms Quinn, who is married to a 45-year-old compliance manager in the banking industry and has a 20-year-old son from a previous marriage, also suffers from bipolar disorder, anxiety and depression.

She joined Mrs Singapore Pageant to raise awareness for ADHD and other mental health conditions, which she terms "hidden disabilities".

She says: "Disabilities affect your ability to function in life, but because conditions like ADHD are not visible from the outset or immediately apparent to other people, sometimes you come across people who are not understanding."

Ms Quinn, who says she encountered discrimination and mockery at a previous workplace due to her various conditions, hopes to be an advocate for those struggling with these issues.

"I see such people online being discriminated against and I hope I can help to raise awareness about these conditions, so people are kinder and more willing to accommodate these people," she adds.

On top of her mental health struggles, Ms Quinn is also a cancer survivor. She was diagnosed with cancer in her fallopian tubes in her late 20s, which later spread to her cervix. She battled the illness for close to 10 years, with periods of remission and recurrence, before becoming cancer-free in her late 30s.

She also suffered four miscarriages during her cancer battle, and eventually decided

against trying for another child due to the emotional distress of her miscarriages.



Mrs Singapore Pageant 2024 contestant Lillian Yeo was diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin lymphoma, a form of blood cancer, at age 36. After two years of treatment via immunotherapy, she is cancer-free. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

She is not the only one in the line-up of women to have fought cancer. Ms Lillian Yeo, 48, is also a survivor.

She was involved in a near-fatal car accident in Malaysia when she was 19, when the car she was driving crashed into a bus. The windscreen shattered over the right side of her face, which left her needing more than 70 stitches, including 40 for her eye area.

Life dealt her another bad hand at age 36, when she was diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin lymphoma, a form of blood cancer.

The business development director says: "I didn't have time to cry or question why. I put myself through long trial treatments and battled recurrences of the cancer."

After two years of treatment via immunotherapy, Ms Yeo was cancer-free. She is now an avid boxing enthusiast and performed a hip-hop dance with muay thai moves for the talent segment of the competition.

When asked if she is confident in winning the title, Ms Yeo – who has a 21-year-old son with her husband, who is in his 50s and works in the education sector – says she is simply giving the competition her best shot.

Ultimately, she hopes to use the pageant platform to raise awareness for palliative care, particularly for Dover Park Hospice, where she volunteered as a befriender.

"Its work resonates with me because a lot of its patients are cancer patients who require support during their last mile. This is where financial assistance, care planning, emotional and psychological support is given to them. Help in the support of funding and volunteering is important."

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