

# My Pageant Experience With MS: Why I Took This Journey



**Isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic was brutal for me. I suffered from major depression as I know many of us did. Throughout this time, I had so many things on my mind: political issues, social issues and personal issues. As I sat and thought about a way could put myself out there, meet new people and speak my truth, I thought, why not pageantry?**

Well, that answer was easy... fatigue, balance, speech, just to name a few. But then I asked myself, what if I can? Even if my symptoms made being on stage a little harder, what if I can do it?

To give you a bit of background, I competed in a pageant when I was 17 - I'm 47 now. So, for me, the world of pageantry for a 47-year-old married woman with kids was a complete unknown. I signed up for a pageant I know of, Mrs. Utah America, and thought, I'm just going to do this so I can prove to myself that I can.



At the rehearsal for Mrs. Utah America.

Going into this pageant, I wanted to focus on diversity and inclusion. I came at this from the life of a Black woman living in Utah and a woman with multiple sclerosis. It was important for me to represent my lived experience and connect with others.

We had meetings leading up to the competition, interview preparation, walking, and the best was opening number rehearsal. I was so scared, especially because I knew I would have to do this in heels. I used to wear 6-inch heels every day with no problem but since being diagnosed with MS in 2015, high heels left my closet. Not to mention the swimsuit portion with high heels. The weight gain with the medication I have been on has been a challenge! But I still knew I had to do this.

The competition was over a weekend in March. Picture this: opening number, swimsuit, state costume and evening gown. The cheering from the audience of my family was so inspiring, and it kept me going after each outfit change.

By the time evening gown came, I couldn't put my shoes on because my hands weren't working, my feet were swollen, and I was in so much pain that I just wanted to lay down. At this moment, one of the amazing women in the pageant put my shoes on for me and helped me up the stairs. At that moment, I knew that I had to complete the pageant.

I did my final walk in my evening gown, and I accomplished my goal! And guess what? I was

named one of the top 10 finalists! I didn't hear my name for the top 5 finalists, but that was okay - I walked away with an even greater honor for me: I was voted Mrs. Congeniality.

I fell in love with being surrounded with like-minded women, getting dressed up and challenging myself. So, why not do a second pageant? And that's exactly what I did. I did a pageant that focused on self-care, Prime Pageants. I worked on personal improvement, goal setting and self-care.

I represented the state of Utah in the National pageant in September. I was fatigued, I was in pain, but I wanted to complete this as well. Again, I met incredible women, and I grew so much that it was worth it.



My state costume at the 2022 Prime Pageants.

Results?

- Completed an eight-week accountability challenge
- Personal Improvement Visionary Award for completing hours in self-care categories
- Gold Presidential Volunteer Service Award
- Congeniality
- Best In Gown

- 2<sup>nd</sup> Runner Up in my division

For my second pageant, I started by focusing on self-care, but it transformed into a platform of something beautiful: learning that we must maintain a healthy relationship with ourselves so we can transmit the good to others.



My evening gown at the 2022 Prime Pageants.

I have grown so much this past year that I have found myself again. I know how to balance my life, how to say no when I'm not feeling well and not feel bad about it, how to embrace all parts of my story, and how to share it with others on both good and bad days.

My MS symptoms are progressing, and each day is a bit more difficult, but I will keep pushing forward. In fact, I competed again in November. I traveled to New Orleans to represent Utah in the USA World Universal pageant. I met an incredible group of diverse women with powerful stories and a passion to make a difference.



My new title: Ms. USA Elite.

I wish I could say all pageants were accommodating to people with disabilities. The best advice I can give on this for anyone who wants to do a pageant is make sure there is full transparency. World Universal was very upfront with me about everything and to have an organization with 3 pillars, one being diversity and inclusion, I knew I couldn't go wrong.

So, what did this experience bring? It brought me to a new sisterhood filled with love, honesty and a celebration of every type of woman!

I can proudly say on November 10, I was crowned Ms. USA Elite! Yes, the woman with MS, who has needed a walker or cane at times, who suffers from extreme fatigue and muscle spasms. I went into each of these pageants being my true authentic self. And in June of 2023, I will compete for the international title in Honolulu, Hawaii!





After being crowned Ms. USA Elite!

We each have our own reasons for what we do. For me, this has been about self-discovery, overcoming fears, and showing that I have so many strengths, including the strength that MS has given me.

I am a MS Warrior, and when I walked across that stage, I thought about everyone who has MS who has felt lost, like they have no voice, has been excluded, and lonely. Each step I took was for every one of you.