

## **From America to Mombasa with a big heart**

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What would you expect of a beautiful 22-year-old young woman, literally on top of the world as the reigning Miss USA? Arrogance maybe? But when I met Miss Rachel Smith, she contradicted my expectations of being someone with an attitude that "I am the most beautiful girl in America."

Her demeanor was both charming and disarming. She is a down-to-earth lady who would have passed for an ordinary beautiful woman in the streets during her recent visit to Mombasa.

"I don't look at myself as the most beautiful girl in the most powerful nation on earth," she says, downplaying my suggestion to that effect, calmly explaining that all 50 women vying for the crown were equally suitable.

### **Low key visit**

Rachel was on a low-key visit to Kenya last week, courtesy of Project Sunshine, a US non-profit volunteer organisation that provides free social, educational and recreational programs to medically challenged children and their families.

In the course of her mission she visited Bombolulu Workshops where she interacted with the physically challenged employees, then Bomu Medical Centre at Magongo where Project Sunshine has established its first chapter in Africa that is one of four outside the United States.

"I started volunteering early in life at school, so when Project Sunshine approached me for this visit I could hardly decline," says the only child of parents who were both members of the U.S. Army. Growing up on military bases in Kentucky and Tennessee, Rachel says she learnt to appreciate the how economic disparities affect people's lives. "My parents, and especially my 87-year-old grandmother with whom I spent a great deal of time, taught me to value others despite their position in society."

Having won her first beauty pageant as a two-year-old, Rachel seemed destined for bigger things. "My father took me to a baby pageant which I surprisingly won," she recalls. "From that time on, the runway became a way of life for me."

But the road to becoming Miss USA was not without obstacles. Last October Rachel was crowned Miss Tennessee, which put her on the race for Miss USA; since one can only enter the contest once, it was a chance of a lifetime.

The Miss USA contest is one of the most competitive pageants in which 15 lucky representatives among 50 young women representing the 50 US states, are selected to appear on a live television broadcast.

The entire event at the Kodak Theatre in Los Angeles, the venue of the annual Academy Awards ceremony, took about two weeks during which the contestants

were judged on confidence, poise, personality and intelligence.

“Each heat has different judges, and all of them felt that I was the best contender so they settled on me,” Rachel says, adding that the whole process was exhausting.

So what was her feeling after being declared Miss USA?

“The feeling is indescribable,” she says. “I mean, there were more than 50 beauties representing all of America, and I could not imagine that I would beat them all. When I heard my name called as the winner, I was shocked and speechless. It was exhilarating!”

As Miss USA she is under contract for a year to the Miss Universe organisation, co-owned by business tycoon Donald Trump and the National Broadcasting Company (NBC).

## **Humility**

What strikes me most about Rachel is her humility, which she says stems from spending a lot of time with her grandmother as a child. However, one of the facts of her life that she found difficult to come to terms with was growing up as an only child.

“My father is one of 11 children, while in my mother’s family they are seven,” she says. “I could not understand why my parents decided to have only me, and I did not like being alone. But as I grew up I learnt to appreciate and share with other children. My granny and parents taught me humility, which is the benchmark of my life.”

But when she was eight, Rachel came face to face with challenges that come with being a mixed race child in America; her mother is white while her father is black.

“The observation was surprising, coming from a child my age who pointed it out to me,” she recalls.

“I was taken aback since the whole colour thing had never mattered to me. It was the first time I discovered that my mother was white and my father black. I had always seen them as my parents, and the colour of their skins had not featured in my mind.

“But instead of getting upset, I was proud of my parents for having done something unique. What I have found difficult to understand is the reason someone would discriminate anyone else on the basis of skin colour.”

While at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee, Rachel was student body president and participated in clubs, student organisations and sports. But what she did most often was to volunteer with different organisations aligned to her interests. She graduated with an honours degree in journalism last year.

Watching her mingle with the children at the Bomu Medical Centre, it was obvious that Rachel is a true lover of children, and this is why she decided to work with

Project Sunshine.

"It gives me a lot of satisfaction to see that I am serving in a project that takes care of children."

One of her other goals during her reign as Miss USA is to champion breast cancer awareness and to work with Project Sunshine for the benefit of underprivileged children with medical problems.

She is passionate about education and volunteer work and says she would also like to work as a journalist in the broadcast media. But she's attracted by the entertainment industry as well and would like to be an actress to explore her talent.

She is not happy with the impression of Africa often conveyed through the international media. On her first visit to Kenya, she says she still remembers the first impression she had of Africa before visiting South Africa several years ago.

"The impression of first visitors to Africa from the developed world is that of a desperate lot who are always crying, suffering from the effects of conflicts and wars, hunger and deprivation. One would hardly expect a smile from an African."

"But we're very surprised when we find very caring and loving people with smiles on their faces. We love the rich culture and history. I have not been disappointed by my visit to Kenya and would love to come back to the country," she says.

So, is there a lucky American man in Miss USA's life? Rachel smiles shyly and wonders whether it is important for her to talk about it. After some coaxing she finally admits that such a man exists, but declines to reveal his name.

"He is pursuing a law degree, and he is a lovely man. Although he sometimes gets jealous, he is proud of me. He often tells his friends, 'meet my girlfriend, the current Miss USA.' I think he enjoys it and is proud to be dating Miss USA," she says.

When I comment that I am privileged to be talking to a lady most men in America would give anything to talk to, she acts offended. "Why?" she asks. "In fact I am honoured and humbled by the interest the Kenyan media has taken in my work with Project Sunshine."