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Little princesses

By Lindsey Nair | 981-3343

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Video by Lindsey Nair

Aimee Blackstock strolled down center stage Sunday to the tune of "Uptown Girl," striking a pose in her hot pink feathered boa.

Then she quickly lost her focus and began tracing her lips with her star-shaped sunglasses.

She is, after all, only 5 years old.

It may be young to enter a beauty pageant, but Aimee's mom, Jennifer Blackstock, says her daughter has always been such a ham that her family nickname is "little Paris."

"I just thought it would be good to keep her up on stage," Blackstock said.

Besides, she says, the Miss Roanoke Valley Princess program is not a competition but rather an opportunity for little girls to pair up with older contestants in a mentoring situation. This is the first year the Miss Roanoke Valley Scholarship Festival has included the princess program and 23 girls ages 5 to 12 are signed up.

"That's what you've got to do to build the program," said Mark Schreier, executive director of the pageant. "You've got to get them from the young age up."

That comment probably would raise no eyebrows coming from a football coach or dance instructor. But Schreier, who has judged and directed pageants off and on since the early 1980s, is well aware that tiny beauty queens are a source of discomfort for many people.

What he calls a stereotype gained a strong foothold after the high-profile 1997 murder of JonBenet Ramsey, a 6-year-old Colorado beauty queen.

Photos of the perfectly coiffed, heavily made-up little girl appeared in the news again in August when former teacher John Mark Karr falsely claimed responsibility for the crime.

 Katelyn Riley, 12, of Covington (left) and Kanaya Webb, 9, get ready to rehearse a musical number during princess practice. The princesses will appear at the Miss Roanoke Valley pageants this weekend

Jared Soares | The Roanoke Times

Katelyn Riley, 12, of Covington (left) and Kanaya Webb, 9, get ready to rehearse a musical number during princess practice. The princesses will appear at the Miss Roanoke Valley pageants this weekend

See the Miss Roanoke Valley contestants

Want to go?

The 2007 Miss Roanoke Valley Scholarship Festival

- When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday
- Where: Cave Spring High School
- Cost: \$10 adults and \$6 students

The Miss Teen Roanoke Valley and Miss Pre-Teen Roanoke Valley competitions

- When: 3:30 p.m. Sunday
- Where: Cave Spring High School
- Cost: \$8 adults; \$4 students
- Combination ticket packages for both pageants are \$15 for adults and \$8 for students. The princesses will perform at both pageants.

Meanwhile, the movie "Little Miss Sunshine" was amusing audiences with its portrayal of child beauty pageants as overly competitive and uptight.

Psychologists say beauty pageants are not for every girl.

"By the time girls hit adolescence, most are already overly preoccupied by their physical appearance and put too much emphasis on that," said Joseph Allen, who teaches child psychology at the University of Virginia. "So anything that enhances that process before adolescence makes me nervous."

But here in the Roanoke Valley, Schreier says, the overly dominant stage mother and her Barbie doll daughter do not really exist. At least, he says he has never seen it.

"The key is the parents need to know their children," he said. "The interest needs to come from them."

Vickie Webb of Roanoke says her daughters Kanaya, 9, and Aaryana, 7, never seemed interested in pageants before. They are not girly girls; if anything, they have been more exposed to sports after seeing their two older brothers play football and basketball through school.

But after helping out their grandmother, Judy Jackson, who volunteers with the Miss Roanoke Valley event, they asked to be princesses this year.

At first, Webb was apprehensive.

"I am more of a books person. I want my kids to be successful and smart. We are really sticklers as far as education," she said. "I guess I always figured it's easy to get caught up in the hoopla of the prettiness, the beauty portion of it."

But Kanaya and Aaryana do well in school and were already interested in foreign language, chess, art and music. Their parents figured they would enjoy the community involvement that comes with being in pageants.

And there's a reason it's officially called the "Miss Roanoke Valley Scholarship Festival" instead of "Miss Roanoke Valley Pageant."

The programs offers a \$2,500 scholarship for the Miss Roanoke Valley winner and \$1,000 savings bonds for the winners of the Miss Teen Roanoke Valley and Miss Pre-Teen Roanoke Valley segment.

"My thought is it's never too soon to get them involved in something that could be an opportunity for them to get a scholarship for school," Webb said.

Libby Riley of Covington says money is the main reason her daughters are in pageants, too. Her oldest, 19-year-old Kylene Riley, is a sophomore at Virginia Tech who has competed in about a half-dozen Miss Virginia preliminaries within the past year. Her 12-year-old sister, Katelyn, is a princess this year.

"I'm not one of those glamour moms who runs after you with a curling iron and makeup," she said. "I'm just a wild and crazy mom who lets them have fun."

Kylene, a tall, black-haired beauty who is majoring in communications, says pageants have been a positive experience for her, even if she has not placed.

"The Miss America pageant system is built on scholarship and community service," she said. "There is another kind of pageant out there, which is little girls in puffy dresses with lots of makeup and their parents telling them what to do."

The key is to not let pageants -- or any one activity -- become an excessive part of a child's life, says Roanoke psychologist Timothy Wilder.

"My recommendation is a well-balanced social life and academic life and recreational life, which allows room for pursuing a deep interest but also keeps your feet planted in the real world."

For pageant contestant Jeanne Jessop, 22, keeping it real includes being comfortable with her body, even if it isn't the "busty, thin, tall" ideal of a beauty queen.

"I am a bigger girl and I think it's open to everybody," she said. "The pageant is not all about being the skinniest or the tallest, it's about having personality and heart."

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