

## Life lessons



“It really isn’t about impressing the judges,” says newly crowned Miss BC Cheryl Dietrich. “It’s about having something inside to share, and learning to share it.”

*Submitted photo*

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The beauty pageant reputation, at least the one the knee-jerk summons up, isn’t always the most positive. Scenes of over-lipsticked, super-permed youngsters practising dance routines — not in the heartbreakingly lovable fashion of Olive, the beauty queen hopeful of Little Miss Sunshine — while over-zealous mothers critique their every step have become fodder for documentaries and talk shows.

And that tough-to-swallow stereotype isn't lost on North Vancouver's Cheryl Dietrich, the newly-crowned Miss BC. In fact, she didn't even enter herself into the contest; her name landed on pageant director Darren Storsley's desk via an anonymous fan.

"Once I met with the people involved in the pageant I was sold," says Dietrich. "The passion was awesome. I just wanted in."

After she committed, the hard work began. Throwing herself into the pageant made her feel "completely uncomfortable." Having wrestled with self-esteem issues, says Dietrich, made being part of such an endeavour quite the undertaking. Sometimes you just don't feel good enough. You don't look the way you want to look, feel the way you want to feel or work the way you want to work.

But it's when you wade into unknown territory that you learn a thing or two about yourself, she says. And that's what Miss BC looks to promote. Instead of the offering the pageant-staple swimsuit competition, Miss BC has a sportswear category. Each contestant also participates in six professional training workshops, ranging in theme from self-defence to interview skills to public speaking.

"About 15 of the 41 contestants told me they are there for the classes, for the self-esteem workshops," says Darren Storsley, pageant director.

"They were there to get out of their shell. And when they leave after the weekend, the shyness is no more. It really isn't about impressing the judges. It's about having something inside to share, and learning to share it."

The pageant's 2010 winner, Storsley notes, focused on educating people on the horrors of the international sex trade. Prime Minister Stephen Harper was so impressed he flew her to 24 Sussex Dr. to discuss her concerns before she went to Thailand to work with victims of the sex trade.

The platform Dietrich hopes to champion during her tenure as Miss BC is one of empowerment. She says she wants to use her position to talk to young girls about the importance of being confident. She plans to approach camps, community groups and schools to spread her message, connecting with girls and women at all points along the way. She'll also be a part of this month's Vancouver Pride festivities and the second annual Outgames later this month.

It isn't an opportunity to offer sermons, she stresses, because preaching doesn't reach people. Her title gives her the chance to help and to continue evolving alongside those she'll be working with. "Anyone can struggle; it doesn't matter who you are," says Dietrich. "But I think we have to get them early."

Dietrich plans to participate in the Miss Canada pageant in February. It'll be another head-first dive into the land of the uncomfortable but, she says, it'll be another learning experience. A larger platform with more eyes focused on her, to be sure, but with that much more potential to help.

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