

I can't believe it...I've won Miss Teenager Universe!



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Heart racing, blood pumping, and hands shaking. My crowning moment felt like something straight out of a movie.

A little girl with a big dream

It's 2009 on a Saturday morning, I am 4 years old and I am exactly where I'm supposed to be. Clad in a pair of Minnie mouse pajamas, donning a pair of plastic Cinderella shoes and carefully balancing a plastic tiara on my little head. I clutch a bowl of warm popcorn in one hand, an ice-cold glass of orange Fanta in the other, and sit cross-legged watching re-runs of beauty pageants on TV.

On this Saturday, like every Saturday, I drift away into my own little world — one full of glitz, glamour and gorgeous gowns. I watched, and watched, and watched as hundreds of glamorous women paraded themselves in stunning evening gowns, sharing their inspiring stories and various brilliant accomplishments. The TV static made it hard to hear, but my imagination filled in the blanks of what the TV missed.

Although I don't remember much of my childhood today, one of the few things I vividly recall was a tall, slender, and effortlessly stunning brunette making her way onto the stage. Miss Universe Australia 2009.

My eyes widened, my breath hitched, my skin prickled.

She announced herself into the microphone — I murmured synonymously with her "Australiaaaaaa."

The crowd responded in an eruption of applause.

Beyond the crown

The pageant scene has long-since been stereotyped as a fanciful image of beauty queens striving for “world peace,” thanks to Sandra Bullock's famous comedy *Miss Congeniality*. But much has changed since the early 2000’s.

Fast-forward to today, I inevitably decided to participate in the Miss Teenager Universe pageant, not only because of lots of encouragement from friends and family, but because of the organisation's commitment to change — not only through words, but through action.

Of course, it may also have had something to do with my mother’s influence, but don’t let the former Miss World finalist hear you say that!

Contrary to what some may think, pageantry is not just about putting on a sparkly dress and walking on stage with a big toothy smile on your face in the hope that you will win a big sparkly crown. In my opinion, pageantry is akin to a professional sport if you will, and Miss Universe is the Olympics.

From an outsider’s perspective, I can understand how competing in a pageant looks intimidating and complicated. There are rules for what to wear, how to walk, and how to essentially perform overall. Contestants must demonstrate a talent and answer complex questions on real-world events and issues in a laughably short amount of time. But months, if not years of hard work and dedication go into this, to not only be physically prepared, but mentally as well.

Make no mistake, pageantry is also overwhelmingly expensive, with gowns averaging anywhere from \$1000 - \$5000, and that’s before walking classes, etiquette lessons, media training, and whatever else you can possibly think of also factored into the equation!

But despite the expenses, the reward is immense. Competing in such a large-scale event also provides teenagers such as myself with an unparalleled platform to showcase our projects, and push messages that matter. For me, it was about using my voice to push my educational message while also empowering and inspiring youth in my own right.

Destination: Indonesia

Hosted in Bali, Indonesia the 2025 addition of Mister Miss Teenager Universe began in spectacular fashion on February 23rd, with a jam-packed itinerary carried out over a 10 day period.

Having travelled to Bali extensively, re-visiting felt very familiar. For me, the highlight of the trip over to Indonesia was getting to meet so many different people from diverse cultures. No matter where you came from, it felt like every culture from all around the world were collectively supporting each other — both on and off the stage.

From the moment I arrived at Sydney International Airport, I was so endlessly grateful for all of the overwhelming support shown by our fellow Aussie's in the lead up to the event. From the Qantas flight attendants on the plane, to our baggage handlers who wrestled over 150kg worth of luggage in Indonesia, all the way to the crowd swarming me at the arrivals gate — the support was very overwhelming in the best possible way.

Prior to the official competition, delegates from over 30 countries participated in group activities throughout Ubud, Uluwatu, and Kuta, featured on national Indonesian Television, and promoted brands such as Fablyme, Mylea Hair Care products, and Louvrea makeup.

Although there was little to no time to venture out of Bali individually, the organisation kept us busy with sightseeing tours, thousand-year old temple walks, and the best culinary experiences Bali had to offer.



From 5:00am wake-up calls, to 1:00am lights-out, the schedule was relentless! I went to bed each night utterly exhausted — though my roommate from the Philippines didn't help, since she had me laughing half the night!

Behind the scenes

After endless hours of rehearsals, choreographed opening numbers, interviews, media training, screenings and much more, the final stretch of the official competition began on the 27th of February at the Kartika Plaza Discovery Hotel.

Over 1.5 years of preparation and hard-work was boiling down to one finite moment.



Despite the competitive nature of the event, there was an overwhelming sense of support and camaraderie among contestants. I found myself bonding with other delegates over shared moments of vulnerability—whether it was by passing around hair-ties, adjusting our dresses at the last second, or encouraging each other before stepping on stage.

One memorable moment came when a fellow contestant, struggling with a wardrobe malfunction, was assisted by another competitor just as she was about to walk on-stage. That small act of kindness was a reminder that, beyond the competition, we were all individuals sharing the same journey.

From the moment I stepped backstage, I could sense the different energies among my fellow contestants in anticipation of walking on an international stage. Some were calm and poised, others jittery with nervous excitement—myself included. It became clear that every competitor brought something unique to the stage—some exuded confidence with their stage presence, while others stood out with their compelling personal stories.

The commotion, the screens, the cameras, the cheerful audience, and the hushed whispers of who the next winner will be ... I loved every single second of it.

Then came the stage call.

Stepping into the spotlight

A for Australia, I go first.

The curtains raised, the lights dimmed, the MC announced my name and country.
“Please welcome, Helena Ristevski...Australiaaaaa.”

Adrenaline surged, then a quiet calm washed over me. Step by step, I walked into the spotlight. This was the moment I’d been waiting for, the moment I’d been diligently preparing for.

Across swimwear, evening gown, national costume, top model, and more, I pushed myself through each round. When it came to the on-stage question, my favourite part, I drew confidence from years of training.



Whilst it can be quite daunting responding to an un-seen and unknown question, public speaking has thankfully always been a strong suit of mine, and pageantry only sharpened that skill — teaching me to think on my feet, command a room, and handle pressure with grace. I loved this portion of preparation, for it easily translates to life outside of pageantry, and it gives you ample confidence while speaking in job interviews, class presentations, and other situations in which you may be speaking under pressure.

In my experience, interview training also develops mental toughness. It trains your mind to think of fear, or anxiety, in a different light. I learned how to ground myself, and perform under pressure and tight deadlines.

But make no mistake, pageantry is a performance, and you are the performer — so public speaking ability is a non-negotiable prerequisite!

Then there was one

30 delegates in the Miss Teenager Universe competition became 6, and that number became 3, and as the saying goes, then there was one.

Silence. That was all I remember.

It was the silence that made my heart beat, my hands shake, and my eyes clench shut in anticipation.

The screens went black. The lights shone bright. The litany of cameras zoomed into focus.

Spectators screamed in a symphony of sound “Columbia” ...“Australia”

Blinded by darkness, the MC built anticipation. ”Who will be our next Miss Teenager Universe?”



“Will it be Australia, or Colombia...?”

The audience waited with baited breaths in anticipation of the winner.

Just as I felt as though I might faint from the nerves, the microphone crackled as the MC announced

“AUSTRALIAAAA!”

The crowd erupted. Confetti cannons exploded. In that instant, I became Miss Teenager Universe 2025.

The lesson

As I walked away from the competition, I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude—not just for the experience itself, but for the friendships formed and the lessons learned. The world of pageantry is demanding, but it is also a platform for personal growth and unforgettable memories.

As someone who comes from a long history of pageantry and modelling, I have learned that pageantry gives you the skills for life. From these in-world experiences and practical life-lessons, I've learned how to command the attention of a room just by walking into it. I've learned how to network and build connections with people from all over the world. I've learned how to be comfortable in myself, confident in myself, and most importantly: I learned how to love myself...and that is what pageantry is really all about. It is about becoming the best version of yourself, regardless of the final outcome.

All in all, I am a firm believer that pageantry prepares you for life. While that might sound redundant, it's true. The road to competition is a journey of growth. It truly betters you inside and out, and pushes you to find yourself.

Pageantry is about becoming the best version of yourself, and learning about who you are along the way.