

## Miss USA - Crowning Achievement

July 1, 2012

The Providence Sunday Journal

Sitting in her new Manhattan apartment, Olivia Culpo opens a scuffed gray case and presents an object that looks plucked from a fairy tale.

“So, this is my crown,” the Cranston native says, holding up a diamond- and emerald-covered symbol of her recent Miss USA victory. Sunlight from a nearby window reflects off 166.82-carats of lab-created gems.

Nearly a month after winning the Miss USA 2012 pageant, Culpo, 20, is acclimating to her new lifestyle as a beauty queen and spokeswoman for Donald Trump’s Miss Universe Organization.

“It’s very strange to think of it in this way, but I guess I’m a brand now,” Culpo says on a recent Saturday afternoon. “I’m no longer Olivia Culpo. I’m Miss USA.”

Culpo, who just finished her sophomore year at Boston University, insists that she didn’t expect to be the one left blowing kisses at the end of 2½ weeks of scrutiny in Las Vegas. She wasn’t the only one who was surprised.

Some of her fellow competitors had been practicing their walks and waves since they were kids. Culpo entered her first pageant — the Miss Rhode Island USA event that qualified her to compete at the national level — last September.

And while she’s been called a classic beauty, at about 5 feet, 7 inches tall — the shortest woman in the competition, she says — Culpo’s looks don’t fit the leggy blonde pageant stereotype.

“I thought, what chance do I have?” says Culpo. “It’s hard to tell because you’re with 50 other girls that are really, really beautiful... They’re interesting, they’re smart, at least they look like it on the surface.”

She’s now the first Miss Rhode Island to win the Miss USA crown in the event’s 61-year history.

Her parents, Peter and Susan Culpo, have always been wildly supportive of the aspirations of their five children — in addition to Olivia, there’s Pete, 24; Aurora, 23; Gus, 16; and Sophie, 15. But they never expected pageantry to enter the conversation.

“When she brought it [entering Miss Rhode Island USA] up, my wife and I were looking at her like, huh?” says Peter Culpo, a co-owner of several Boston restaurants, including Parish Café and The Lower Depths Tap Room. “That would have been like her saying, I’m going to go study to be a monk in Tibet or something.”

Sports, homework and music were the regular topics of discussion in the Culpo family home, a five-bedroom Victorian in the Edgewood neighborhood of Cranston.

Indifferent to pageants at the time, her dad initially held back full approval so Olivia would gain a greater appreciation for the approximately \$700 entry fee he eventually gave her. But her mom and older sister, Aurora, voiced opposition, calling pageants tacky and narcissistic.

“With Miss Rhode Island, I was embarrassed,” says Aurora, who shares Olivia’s wide-set eyes and big smile, but has pale skin and blonde hair. “I was like, please don’t tell anybody. We got in some serious fights about it. She was like, ‘you’re not supportive of this’ and I was like, ‘yeah, I’m not.’”

One of the things that turned Susan off was the pageant’s lack of a talent component. Susan, a violist with the Rhode Island Philharmonic, was thinking Olivia should have had the opportunity to play her cello, an instrument she has been dedicated to since the age of 6.

But her family’s skepticism faded as Olivia found success with her new hobby. To their shock, she won Miss Rhode Island USA in a gown she rented online “for about \$20.”

“After Miss Rhode Island, I knew that I had to be supportive,” Susan says. “I’ve completely come around. I’m a pageant mom now.”

Aurora, who is working on a master’s degree in elementary education at Roger Williams University, expresses a similar change of opinion. “I’m proud of my sister because it took a lot of discipline,” she says. “Now, I’m kind of along for the ride. I like the part that I play in it, kind of being in the background and seeing it unfold, but also getting the perks of coming to visit and stuff.”

Olivia's dad and Aurora have traveled to New York to see her in her new home, but her mom has not yet been able to visit because she's been in California with Gus. (Before Olivia's pageant win, the Culpos rented a house in Orange County so he could play with a baseball team there).

This week, the whole family will be reunited during Olivia's Rhode Island "homecoming." She is scheduled to make several appearances, including riding in a convertible in the Bristol Fourth of July Parade and singing "America the Beautiful" at the Rhode Island Philharmonic's Independence Day pops concert.

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**For years**, Danielle Lacourse, who went to school with Olivia at St. Mary Academy Bay View, had been trying to convince her to enter a pageant. Lacourse, 26, a first runner-up to Miss USA in 2007, says she saw a spark in Olivia early on (Olivia was in seventh grade when Lacourse was a high school senior).

The girls kept in touch as each graduated from Bay View and went on to college. "I sent her Facebook messages every so often saying, listen, you really should think about doing a pageant. It may not be your cup of tea, but I think you could do really well," Lacourse recalls.

Olivia was hesitant for awhile, but warmed to the idea as Lacourse continued telling her how the experience boosted her public speaking skills and self-esteem. About a year ago, she signed up for the Miss Rhode Island USA pageant with Lacourse as her coach. Olivia also figured it would be good for her budding entertainment career, as it was for former pageant contestants Halle Berry, Giuliana Rancic and Maria Menounos.

She began casually modeling about three years ago when Providence-based designer Andrea Valentini, a family friend, asked her if she'd be interested in posing with her handbags and jewelry. "I was really excited because it was something I wanted to do," Olivia says. "I was a little awkward and chubby growing up and all of a sudden it seemed like I grew into this whole other person. I'd look at the photos and think, when did this happen?"

In 2010, Boston modeling agency Maggie, Inc. signed Olivia after she showed them some of Valentini's photos. She continued working for Valentini — walking in StyleWeek Providence, for instance — and through the agency landed additional jobs shooting advertisements and local fashion spreads. She also played a small role in "Ted," the recently released movie from "Family Guy" creator Seth MacFarlane.

Valentini has seen Olivia's confidence grow over the last few years. "Back then, I saw a pretty face, not a pageantry girl," says Valentini. "But she was able to sort of mold herself in a very short period of time. It's amazing to see that she's now comfortable enough in her own skin to be able to walk on stage in front of the world, really half naked, and blow kisses."

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**After winning** the Miss Rhode Island USA crown, Olivia devoted herself to getting ready for the Miss USA pageant. This time, she had more help. "Every state is given a team," she says. "I was given a stylist, a personal trainer, an interview coach and a director, who kind of gave me an idea of the pageant."

A self-described geek, Olivia applied piles of research and discipline to her pageant prep. "I didn't live a college life at all," she says. Instead, she weighed her meals, read up on current events, and made a scrapbook of potential outfits with her younger sister, Sophie (contestants need at least three wardrobe changes for every day of the 2½-week pageant).

Olivia has brought evidence of her hard work to her new home, provided by the Miss Universe Organization.

Wearing a black tank top, long leopard-print skirt and leather sandals, she places three notebooks on the dining room table. "It's so cute to look at this now," she says, opening a journal with a photo of Audrey Hepburn on the cover.

The books are filled with doodles and notes, including advice given to her over the last year ("That's my personal trainer, Scott. He says don't worry, just be yourself and be sharp"), Rhode Island facts ("You could fit 424 Rhode Islands in Alaska"), makeup instructions ("First, apply primer...") and self-critiques breaking down how she performed on local TV and radio programs.

"Don't say well all the time," she reads from the journal. "Don't say I guess. Don't say like."

Lacourse also helped Olivia sharpen her public-speaking skills. They spent hours reviewing sample questions — "Tell me about yourself." "Tell me a joke" — over nonfat lattes at the Garden City Starbucks.

Lacourse frequently reminded her to avoid giggling while speaking, “but I also made sure not to overcoach her,” Lacourse says. “She’s wonderful on her feet.”

Most Friday nights, Olivia opted out of dates and frat parties. Instead, she traveled home from BU to get good night’s sleep in her childhood bedroom before Saturday morning workouts at her trainer’s Warwick gym.

Her fierce dedication impressed the Culpes, but not everyone in her life responded favorably.

“She lost a lot of friends along the way,” Aurora says. “People that weren’t accepting of her and thought Olivia’s changed. Because we have a lot of mutual friends, people would call me and be like, ‘I don’t even know who she is anymore, she’s so into herself.’”

Olivia didn’t want to isolate herself, she says, but found it difficult to invest energy into people who didn’t approve of her goal. “So you do have to choose because it’s hard to keep your confidence up while people looked at you and said what you’re doing wasn’t worth your time. I guess that was my biggest battle, just sticking to my guns when other people didn’t see eye to eye, especially my own mom.”

She says skeptics should know that pageants are “not at all” about objectifying women. “It’s really about how real you are and how you connect to the audience.”

During the final round of the Miss USA competition, Olivia’s unflustered answer to a question about whether transgendered contestants should be able to compete in beauty pageants — she said “this is a free country and to each their own” — drew a roar of applause from the live audience and supporters around the country.

“Everybody’s telling me it was [that] answer that put me over the top,” she says. “But I think it was my ability to just... the lights and camera would go on and I was still myself. Someone would push me a little and I didn’t feel it. I would just let things roll off my back.”

Olivia didn’t have the opportunity to play her cello on the Miss USA stage, but she says she thinks her background in music was beneficial at the pageant. As a kid, she spent her summers at some of the country’s top music camps and in high school performed with the Boston Youth Symphony Orchestras. “It definitely taught me how to be comfortable in front of people, discipline, hard work,” she says.

Growing up as one of five kids in a tight-knit Italian family also shaped her. “We’d tease everybody, so I think that helped the kids not take themselves too seriously,” her dad, Peter, says.

As the middle child, Olivia insists that she received less attention from her parents than the other kids and says it probably taught her to be more independent. “I had five kids in eight years and I worked,” her mom, Susan, says. “We did a lot for our kids, and it paid off. But being in the middle, Livvie was probably my most ignored child. She always talks about the time we forgot her at swimming.”

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“**This is where** I live now,” Olivia says, leading guests through the Manhattan apartment she shares with reigning Miss Universe, Leila Lopes, from Angola.

The space, on the 14th floor of a midtown apartment building, overlooks a taxi-filled avenue. A sliver of Central Park is visible far in the distance. The apartment has a galley kitchen and dining room with a small table and crystal chandelier. The living area has deep ruby walls, a vase of tulips and plenty of entertainment (fashion magazines, board games, DVDs including “Black Swan.”)

Sitting at the dining room table with her shoulders back and spine straight, Olivia appears unfazed as she discusses former Miss Pennsylvania USA Sheena Monnin’s allegations that the pageant was rigged. “For me to get upset over something that’s not true would just be silly,” she says. “People can judge for themselves.” She says she views the situation as a case of poor sportsmanship.

She goes on to refer to her new boss, Trump, as “somebody who’s going to be remembered” and says that scandals (drugs, sex tapes) involving previous title holders don’t affect her reign. “Things have gone down...that obviously wouldn’t throw Miss USA in a positive light,” Olivia said. “But it’s not really my place to try to fix that.”

Despite her pageant-winning poise, every so often Olivia’s words and expressions serve as a reminder that she’s barely out of her teens (she celebrated her 20th birthday in May).

“How do I stay out of ‘the bubble’? she asks. “I Googled that the other day: How not to get jaded. I always like to inform myself because you never know.”

She celebrated her Miss USA win not with champagne, but by eating a cheeseburger in her hotel suite.

She says she doesn't currently have a boyfriend, but "that would be cool."

Olivia is still being briefed on all that her job will entail, but says she's looking forward to promoting music education, raising awareness of issues surrounding ovarian and breast cancers and preparing for the Miss Universe competition, in December.

She insists that her main duty is being a good — and approachable — role model. "I really just want to be as personable as possible with fans and be someone they can go to for guidance," she says, adding that attending all-girls Bay View taught her the importance of looking up to other women.

So, does she feel famous yet?

"Hmm...do I?," she asks, placing a finger on her chin. "No, I guess I don't ...I mean I do have a platform now..." But Olivia says she views her new title not as the end goal, but one step toward a career as an actress or television host.

"It doesn't make for a good story if I say I'm thinking ahead," she says. "But I can't help but think that in one year I will just be Olivia Culpo again."