

Education in Professionalism: The Radiologist as Beauty Queen

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Pageants teach the exact same skills as sports do: goal setting, “can do” attitude, and performance under pressure. But in pageants you wear much better shoes! -- Valerie Hayes

On May 3, 2014 in Atlanta, Georgia, Arthy Saravanan was crowned Mrs. India International 2014. Several factors made this event particularly remarkable. As a child, Arthy had been a tomboy, more interested in cars, tree climbing, and playing sports with her older brother than dressing up. She had no experience with pageants of any kind, and until just a few months before the contest, she had never heard of Mrs. India International. At the time of the contest, she was still nursing her 10-month-old daughter. And perhaps most remarkably, she was working full time as a radiology resident.

Arthy's experiences as Mrs. India International make a fascinating story and offer surprisingly germane insights into professionalism. Before turning to these, a brief sketch of her life is in order. Arthy was born in southern India, moved with her family to Oman for most of her childhood, and then relocated to Toronto. She majored in human biology at the University of Toronto, attended medical school at Indiana University, and then matched in radiology at Northeast Ohio Medical University.

Throughout college, medical school, and residency, Arthy also practiced classical Indian dance. After studying and performing professionally for 10 years, she was qualified to teach, and during her residency training, she started a Zumba fitness class at her local YMCA in Canton, Ohio.

During Arthy's third year of training, she was having a conversation with a friend about the changes that had taken place in their lives since they married and became mothers. Her friend was moved by Arthy's account of how she was spending less and less time pursuing her own individual interests, yet finding life more and more fulfilling. She asked Arthy for a copy of her resume and a few photographs,

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which on a lark Arthy supplied. A few weeks later, she received a request from the Mrs. India International pageant for more photos and a “ramp walk” video.

At this point, Arthy began looking into the contest. It is a beauty pageant for women of Indian descent from all over the world. Its purpose is to celebrate the lives and accomplishments of married Indian women. Arthy saw it is an opportunity to advocate for one of the causes nearest to her heart, the problem of health care disparities among impoverished women and children around the world. So she sent in the photos and video, which were followed by several phone and video interviews. To her surprise, she was named a finalist.

When she arrived in Atlanta with her parents, husband, and daughter in tow, she was surprised to learn that a significant amount of time was allocated to coaching and training on every aspect of the pageant, and in particular, how to perform in interviews. The competition phase then lasted 2 days. The first consisted of interviews with a panel of five judges, during which she answered many questions about her life, accomplishments, and sense of mission. The second day took place on stage, walking in different dresses and then participating in a fitness round.

Once the top five finalists were named, each came back on stage and answered a question concerning the cause they were working for. Arthy, who will pursue a fellowship in breast imaging, spoke passionately about the need to provide imaging services to underprivileged women around the world. After that, pageant officials gathered the finalists on the stage, where they would announce first the second runner up, then the first, and finally the winner. Arthy was stunned when her name was the last one to be announced.

She remembers looking out past the blinding lights into the audience. She had arranged earlier in the evening for her mother to put her infant daughter to bed at 9 pm, and it was now nearing midnight. But when she found her family in the seats, she was surprised to see her daughter still in the arms of her mother, who was jumping up and down for joy. Her father could not believe that his “frog princess” was

now a beauty queen. One of the four people to crown Arthy on stage was her husband, Ranjith, who now proudly refers to himself as “Mr. India International (by association).”

Many of the other contestants were professional models, and Arthy credits her surprising victory to several things. First, her dancing had kept her physically fit—so much so that, just 3 months after giving birth, she had run her first half-marathon. Second, she was clearly passionate about her cause, which drew directly from her full-time career. And third, her responsibility for patients' lives at work every day helped her keep the competition in perspective and maintain her composure at times when other contestants' nerves might have gotten the better of them.

Says Arthy, “Nothing develops composure like having a surgeon breathing down your neck in the middle of the night while you are poring over hundreds of images from a trauma CT scan.”

Being crowned Mrs. India International and representing India in the Mrs. International pageant in Jacksonville, Florida provided Arthy with many opportunities to advance her cause. She became the International spokesperson for Handicare International, an organization that sees to improve care for the poor and disabled in rural India. She also became an ambassador for Medical Yatra, which promotes medical mission trips in India. She spoke at many different civic and community events, as well as cultural and international festivals.

Says Arthy, “ As someone who has always been a bit bookish and a nerd, always focused on my studies, it was strange to have young kids run up to me and ask for my autograph or want to take pictures with me.”

Looking back over the experience, Arthy feels that she gained many insights. First, although such contests are called beauty pageants, everyone involved is not focused purely on looks. “Sure,” she says, “I did see contestants using duct tape to hide some extra flesh, and some of the contestants did seem rather vain, but many of the people I met had fascinating careers and were very sincere and passionate about the

causes they were representing. Many really wanted to make a difference and saw the pageant as a way to draw more attention and support to their cause.”

Second, Arthy learned that you cannot always judge a book by its cover. “Just by looking at someone, you cannot tell who they really are,” she says. “The same goes for knowing where someone is from or what their occupation is. To know who they truly are and what they really care about, you need to talk with them. I try every day to apply this lesson to patient care, being extra careful not to dismiss someone just because they do not have much money or do not seem to be as well educated as I am. If you take the time, they often turn out to have something to teach you.”

Finally, the experience has helped Arthy become a better-rounded person. Instead of just studying for tests and the like, she is more inclined “to reach out to people, to get to know them, and to learn what I can from them,” she says. “And I am also much more focused than I used to be on communities and the role communities can play in making people's lives better. When I settle down in the future, I plan to start another dance class, to give people a chance to become fitter, develop more self-confidence, and get to know others.”

For a variety of reasons, most of us will never participate in a beauty pageant. But we can all take Arthy's lessons to heart. Visually oriented professionals such as radiologists need to work extra hard to ensure that we do not judge others by appearances. We need to ensure that we make the most of opportunities for conversation in our daily work. And many of us need to be reminded to reach out to our communities to help make them better places in which to live. As Arthy's experience bears out, it is often when we stray from well-trodden paths that we stand the best chance of learning such lessons.