



**MR. MISS AMERICA** New CEO George Bauer is under close scrutiny. (That's the first Miss America, Margaret Gorman, looking over his shoulder.)

## Miss America Faces Reality

Declining TV ratings. Three CEOs in four years. Unrest in the ranks. Is it time for Atlantic City's signature event to get the hell out of Atlantic City?

IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS MISS AMERICA.

In 1954, 46 years before anyone had even heard of Richard Hatch, the gay nudist whose tactical skills would help turn *Survivor* into a national obsession, Americans gathered around their TV sets and watched Lee Meriwether burst into tears—the first Miss America crowned on national television. Since then, the run for the rhinestones has endured in Atlantic City, its home for the past eight decades, still providing the Boardwalk with a jolt every year as thousands of fans inside Convention Hall wait to see who will be the last smile standing.

This past September was no different. On a surprisingly balmy Saturday night, the last two finalists in the 83rd Miss America contest stood onstage, clutching and hugging one another, waiting for the vote of the pageant's version of the tribal council—in this case, a panel of seven D-list celebrities. In that electric moment when the winner was revealed, there was the traditional hysteria, with fans rising to their feet inside the hall as Ericka Dunlap, Miss Florida, took her shrieking victory walk down the runway.

In a media age in which *Survivor* has begat *The Amazing Race* which has begat *The Bachelor* and on and on, the grandmother of them all should be thriving, cresting atop the ratings every fall. After all, it has everything we crave in reality television: glamour, contestant-by-contestant elimination, a hint of bitchiness behind tight smiles, scantily clad women willing to risk humiliation before a national audience.

But just the opposite is true. In the very genre she created, Miss America has become a distant runner-up.

WITH HIS GEORGE HAMILTON TAN, dapper suits and wire-rim glasses, George Bauer has a certain anchorman quality that makes him well suited for selling the pageant's current "Everything's fine" message. Still, as Bauer sits in the empty press briefing room inside cavernous Convention Hall several days before this year's pageant, his dandyism can't hide his fatigue. The pageant's president and CEO was on the beach at 2 a.m., fretting about a much-hyped hurricane that, in the end, wouldn't show. It was just one of the hundreds of headaches that go into being Mr. Miss America.

"In this organization, you don't just volunteer your time—you volunteer your heart," says Bauer, 59, who, it should be noted, does not volunteer his time. "And I respect that. I also respect the tradition. I also know we need to move ahead, to forge a delicate balance of respecting the past and respecting the future."

Miss America is a cottage industry in Atlantic City, every year filling the coffers of businesses ranging from the Schoppy trophy shop ("Official Awards and Fine Gifts for the Miss America Organization") to the White House Sub Shop with the dollars of 51 state delegations, who come for an entire week to root for their hometown

Photograph by Michael Spain-Smith

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## Pop Culture

girls. The pageant also draws an intricate network of volunteers from the Shore, Philly and beyond, who flock to town to snatch the only slice of national glamour they are ever likely to know.

But as charming as all of that is, Miss America is something of a dinosaur in these modern times, clomping along the Boardwalk to ever-dwindling attention from the rest of the world. In 1954, 27 million viewers tuned in to see that first telecast. This year, 10.3 million people did—an all-time low. And the problems go far deeper than declining ratings; they speak to an institution fighting for its life. Bauer is Miss America's third chief executive officer in four years. The pageant's titleholders are becoming increasingly grouchy in public. Its board of directors is barely on speaking terms with state organizers, who, in turn, are in open revolt against the national organization. Sponsors are bailing. And last year, the pageant, clobbered by bad investments and legal payouts, went broke, posting a \$1.4 million loss and leaving the organization

**"They've all but killed it," says ex-pageant volunteer Richard Helfant. "There's no longer any glitz, glamour or fantasy."**

with net assets of \$5.6 million—its lowest reserves since 1994.

Despite it all, Bauer is upbeat. "I'm not worried," he says. "We're getting more relevant, and more attractive to sponsors. They didn't like the perception of instability, either. And we have achieved that stability."

Paradoxically, stability may be exactly what's hurting Miss America the most. The world has changed enormously since Miss America's heyday in the '50s and '60s—feminism has changed the way we look at women; cable has changed the way we watch TV; gambling has changed Atlantic City. Yet the pageant has changed remarkably little. Yes, it focuses more on brains than it used to, and each year it trots out some new gimmick—viewer voting, rule changes—to keep the audience interested.

But the power behind Miss America remains the same. Eight decades into its existence, the board of directors of the Miss America Organization is still comprised almost exclusively of local Atlantic City volunteers. This board—George Bauer's boss-

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es—should have been replaced years ago, its seats filled instead with corporate heavy hitters, philanthropists and celebrities, who could have brought in sponsor dollars the pageant now desperately needs to survive.

Instead, like an overbearing mother, the board has resolutely refused to give up any control. And now it may be too late to save its sole progeny.

**T**HE BOARD OF THE MISS AMERICA Organization is as impenetrable a force as you are likely to find anywhere: a shadowy, insecure, defensive group that views outsiders with suspicion and more than a little contempt.

And that board controls far more than a beauty pageant. Miss America is the largest provider of scholarships for women *in the world*, this year doling out more than \$4.5 million in grants and awards. The dozen members of the board controlling this largesse include Soundra Usry-Hollingsworth, the niece of bumbling former Atlantic City mayor James Usry; Corinne Sparenberg, the head of the pageant's "hostess" committee; and Leo Yeager III, the founder and proprietor of the Boardwalk Peanut Shoppe. Only one member out of 12 is from out of state: Tamara Haddad, a TV producer who joined last year.

For years, the state groups that organize pageants from the local level on up—the backbone of the MAO, with thousands of volunteers—have begged the board to cast a wider net and land prominent national figures, people who could bring in sponsors. The board, currently chaired by an Atlantic City educator named Toni Fultz Fauntleroy, has consistently adopted a "We'll mull that over" posture.

Robert W. Arnhym, the California-based chairman of the National Association of Miss America State Pageants, which represents the states' interests, says no one believes the board is mulling it over. "That is a criticism that has been leveled more than once by our volunteers," says Arnhym, a no-nonsense veteran who's been involved with the Miss California pageant for four decades. "They feel the growth and development [of the pageant] is somewhat frustrated, because it's limited to the people of Atlantic City."

Looking at board chair Toni Fultz Fauntleroy the night of the pageant, it's easy to see why she and her fellow members would be reluctant to invite outsiders in. Sitting in a box worthy of Ascot to the left of the famed runway, she is constantly air-kissed and fawned over, appearing suitably commanding and regal in a smashing black beaded pantsuit with matching wrap and bag. What would become of all of this



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## Pop Culture

attention should, say, Meg Whitman of eBay join the board?

Predictably, Fauntleroy—a divorced mother of two who has lived in Atlantic City since 1975—is downright testy on this point when I raise it with her during pageant week. When I ask, for example, how many people can serve on the board, she sighs. “It is not our policy on the board to discuss with the media our bylaws and policies,” she snaps. When I ask her why the board has been reluctant to include out-of-towners, she replies, “That’s just the way it has been. We also used to not allow two-piece bathing suits, either. So things change. And we do now have people outside of the Atlantic City area on the board.” That would be Haddad. When I ask Fauntleroy where Haddad lives, she says she doesn’t know. (For the record, it’s Washington, D.C.)

As for the MAO’s, shall we say, chilly relationship with the state organizations, Fauntleroy dismisses it as idle gossip. “We don’t really need a peacemaker,” she insists. “It may sound trite, but we really are family.”

That’s news to the states. “We had some serious problems several years ago, which stemmed from the independence of the Miss America board,” Arnhym says. “We felt we had no input, and there were things we could have helped with. We were concerned about the management of Miss America, with the whole general growth and development of the Miss America Organization.”

With good reason. The board has been at the epicenter of almost every controversy that has plagued the pageant in the past several years, thanks either to its action or refusal to take action. In 1998, the board hired Robert Beck, a former director of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, as its new CEO. Beck immediately caused problems by pushing through changes—approved by the board—to contestant eligibility rules, allowing women who’d been divorced or had abortions to compete. The state organizations, which see themselves as the keepers of the virtue flame, went ballistic; Beck was hung out to dry by the board and canned. (Beck later sued for wrongful termination; the suit was settled.)

The board then turned to Robert Renneisen, a former CEO of Atlantic City’s Claridge Hotel and Casino. Things went from bad to worse. No sooner had Renneisen taken charge than the parents of Miss America 2002 Katie Harman alleged publicly that their daughter had been billed more than \$2,000 for a party after her crowning, that she was being forced to pay for her own clothing alterations, and that



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she wasn't being booked for personal appearances. The states also complained about Renneisen, saying he and the national staff were rude and unresponsive to their needs. "We had a series of confrontations with Mr. Renneisen," Arnhyrn says, "and he did not listen to us ... Since we provide the majority of scholarships and all of the 51 contestants, we felt we really should be their partner." (Numerous attempts to reach Renneisen were unsuccessful.)

Things only got worse when Renneisen suggested the pageant could net money by selling Miss America's likeness on slot machines. But, tellingly, what convinced the board to write his pink slip was his public threat to move the pageant out of Atlantic City—possibly to the Mohegan Sun casino in Connecticut—unless the city ponied up \$1 million a year in incentives to keep it. Renneisen was out. (He later received a settlement of more than \$300,000.)

Wearily, last year the board turned to Renneisen's deputy, Bauer, a graduate of Penn Charter and Widener University—in other words, a local. But the bad publicity didn't stop. In 2002 the pageant was back in court, this time with Miss North Carolina Rebekah Revels, who resigned after nude photos of her surfaced (sound familiar?) and then sued to get her crown back. That battle cost the pageant more than \$270,000.

When I ask Toni Fauntleroy to address some of the rough patches the pageant has hit in recent years, she cuts me off. "What company in America hasn't?" she huffs. I tell her plenty of companies haven't burned through three CEOs in four years. "Well," she says, "there are plenty of companies whose CEOs are in jail right now, so I think we're doing pretty good."

Which may explain why they're not.

**T**O UNDERSTAND HOW MISS AMERICA ended up on a runway that now looks suspiciously like the window ledge of a tall skyscraper, you need to understand where she came from. The pageant was founded in 1921, as a bathing-beauty contest meant to extend Atlantic City's summer tourism season. The quirky contest was a smash—in its second year, 250,000 spectators gathered on the beach to watch it—and Miss America quickly morphed into the spectacle we know today.

For more than three decades, the pageant was run by a Florida transplant named Lenora Slaughter, who guided it to its greatest pop-culture prominence. She introduced the scholarship program. She landed Marilyn Monroe as grand marshal of the parade. She reeled in celebrities—Norman Rockwell, Grace Kelly, Joan Crawford—as judges. But by the time Slaughter retired in

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1967, the world was a different place for women. And it was at this crossroads that the pageant may have taken its first left turn. It handed the reins to a local stockbroker named Albert Marks, a gentle man whose strategy for weathering the turbulence of the feminist movement was simply to ignore it—even when protesters came year after year to picket outside of Convention Hall, to the delight of TV news crews.

Marks is probably best known as the man who, in 1984, made Vanessa Williams give up her crown after nude photos of her surfaced—a move that only cemented the public's impression that the pageant was out of step with the live-and-let-live times. When he left in 1987, the job fell to the organization's longtime attorney, Leonard Horn, who is largely credited with keeping the MAO afloat even as it sank into irrelevance. Horn began requiring contestants to speak out on national issues, and adopt platforms that would highlight their "year of service." While the move has yielded some impressively brainy winners, brains are not why people watch Miss America. And that is a message that may have gotten lost as the pageant fumbled its way through its disastrous fiascos since.

**L**IKE A FADING MOVIE STAR WHO requires more and more pancake makeup as she ages, Miss America tries desperately each year to find a gimmick, some new reason for people to watch and care about her. Each year, the pancake gets a bit thicker—and it's quickly risking resembling embalming fluid.

In recent years, the pancake has taken the form of a viewer poll to see if the swimsuit competition should be axed (callers voted four-to-one to keep it); a swimsuit competition with no shoes (radical!); having the 41 contestants not in the Top 10 vote for the winner (it's *Survivor!*); a current-events quiz (This ... is ... *Jeopardy!*); even having a "Top 20" finalists pool (more inclusive!). The ratings keep on sliding.

"It is very difficult to affect change in an institution that has the history that this one does," Bob Bain, the executive producer of the telecast, told a press briefing in Atlantic City during pageant week. Bain is the man who once compared Miss America to the *Titanic*. "The good news is, it's been on television for 50 years," he says. "The bad news is, it's been on television for 50 years. Everyone who watches it has five decades of expectations of what it's going to be."

Cue more pancake makeup. This year, Bain dreamed up the idea of a new competition: casual wear. The girls would strut the runway in outfits they might wear out on

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the town. While the result would be met with decidedly mixed reviews (“A Gap commercial,” one pageant vet sneered to me), Bain, a goateed, Hawaiian-shirt-wearing hippie type who could pass for one of the Beach Boys, insists it’s the right direction. “It’s fresh,” he says, standing in the giant cement catacomb directly outside Convention Hall. “It makes these girls look like they actually *live* in this millennium, you know what I mean? They don’t look like a bunch of Stepford Wives. Even with the boobs up to here and all that stuff, they just look normal. And the reason I think there’s been viewer erosion is because people don’t *buy* it. They’re at home, and they think this is completely plastic and artificial. My whole thing is, let’s bring this down to a level where each girl starts to feel like they’re real.”

But do viewers want “real”? After all, how “real” is reality TV? For every person who applauds Miss America’s attempt to sashay into the 21st century, there are legions of pageant loyalists who see it as a wrecking ball in feminist clothing.

“They’ve all but killed it,” laments Richard Helfant, a former pageant volunteer who now runs the tourist curiosity that is Lucy the Elephant in Margate. “They’ve stripped it from being a pageant, from what it’s supposed to be. There is no longer any glitz, glamour or fantasy. What was once a beauty pageant with a scholarship program is now a scholarship program with a beauty element. I’m not negating the value of the scholarship program; that’s important. But that is not what sells Miss America to the American public.” This year, he says, “The Weather Channel was more exciting that night.”

In an effort to stem the tide of vanishing viewers, in recent years ABC and the MAO have trotted out a series of hosts to try to find their new Bert Parks, who fronted the pageant for decades. While some, such as Tony Danza and Wayne Brady, have received decent reviews, others—the painful duo of Meredith Viera and former pro quarterback Boomer Esiason, for example—have bombed. What the pageant really needs is a bigger star who is much more hip—a Chris Rock, or even a Carson Daly. Still, ABC—which keeps the pageant on a short leash, only signing one-year contracts—understands “that there is probably a ceiling on the number of people who are going to watch a beauty pageant,” producer Bain says. “There’s only a certain number of people who are ever going to give a shit.”

Helfant disagrees, and says the MAO could get the pageant off of life support if it simply did a better job pulling in the stars. If

the Kids’ Choice Awards on Nickelodeon can get Tom Cruise and Rosie O’Donnell, he says, there’s no reason Miss America can’t. “Look at the Super Bowl,” Helfant says. “It’s not about football. It’s about the pre-game show, the commercials, halftime. No one cares whether it’s the Eagles vs. the Broncos or the Chargers vs. the Bucs. It’s the show-business spectacular. Miss America is Atlantic City’s own little Super Bowl every single year. And they blow it.”

**S**O IS IT TIME TO GIVE ANOTHER CITY A crack? The issue of moving the pageant out of Atlantic City was surfacing, in hushed tones and openly in the

media, long before Bob Renneisen started talking about Connecticut. There is a growing feeling—particularly among the states—that the pageant should move. As for loyalists who insist tradition dictates that the pageant stay at the Jersey Shore, Arnhyrn says, “The truth is, the public doesn’t really care where it is. Often my friends will say, ‘Where is it being held this year?’ or, ‘Is it still in Atlanta?’ They don’t recognize that it’s in Atlantic City.”

The MAO has five years left on a seven-year contract to keep the contest by the Boardwalk. Under its agreement with the Atlantic City Convention & Visitors Authority (ACCVA), the MAO receives

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## Pop Culture

\$678,000 a year, adjusted annually for inflation, until 2008. After that, the pageant is once again geographically up for grabs. "I would hate to lose them," says Jeffrey Vasser, the ACCVA's executive director. "The pageant's been here for 83 years, and having that thrill of Miss America is part of Atlantic City. It's just part of our fabric—like Monopoly and salt water taffy."

Still, it is curious that the ACCVA has never done an economic impact study to determine how much money the pageant pumps into the local economy. And there are many reasons—much better ones than salt water taffy—to leave. In recent years there has been a relentless campaign by Disney World to lure the pageant to Orlando, where it would enjoy state-of-the-art television studios (right now, the pageant must pony up to build one and then tear it down), top-flight accommodations and promotion, and, perhaps most important, that wholesome Disney image. "As a practical matter, you always have to look at potential venues, to see what they have to offer you," says Arnhyrn. Disney World, he says, "has surfaced again and again, and I have to say that if the decision was ever made by the Miss America board of directors, Orlando would be very high on the list." (Coincidentally, the annual meeting of the state pageants this winter is in Disney World.)

But any decision to move the Miss America Organization to Florida or anywhere else rests with its board of directors. Bauer, who as CEO also sits on the board, says Atlantic City "is our tradition, our home, and at this point both of those things are very important." Meaning, don't pack just yet.

But that Miss America will stay on in Atlantic City is a bet few gamblers would be willing to take. If the board does allow national heavy hitters on, it's probably only a matter of time before the pageant leaves A.C.

If it doesn't, it may live up to Bob Bain's earlier comparison to the *Titanic*. Corporate sponsorship is the key, Arnhyrn says, noting that today, lots of nonprofits are competing aggressively for the same dollars, and that causes such as health and elementary education may look more attractive to businesses than a 21-year-old Florida coed wearing rhinestones. Those other charities "have a more effective story to tell," he laments. "Nobody ever died of Miss America." **T**

Michael Callahan has written about the Miss America pageant for *Good Housekeeping*, *Us Weekly* and *New Jersey Monthly*. E-mail: [mail@phillymag.com](mailto:mail@phillymag.com)