

Miss North Carolina contestants talk Durham ties, pageant stereotypes

By Kelcie Frye
The Durham VOICE

Obtaining the job of Miss North Carolina is no easy task, but Savannah Culbreth and Maya Bryant believe they are up for the challenge.

Once a year, 49 women gather in Greensboro to prepare themselves for the annual Miss North Carolina competition in June. For Culbreth, Miss Durham 2018, this is her first year competing for the title.

“The night I won I was in total shock,” Culbreth said. “I am only 19 years old, so I’m just really excited to be here. It is such an honor to be representing the Bull City on the Miss North Carolina stage.”

Culbreth is a first-year at UNC School of the Arts and is pursuing a bachelor’s degree in music with a concentration in vocal performance. She hopes to someday grace the stages of Broadway and perform at the Metropolitan Opera.

“Music is in my blood. My passion for music has been instilled in me before I was even born,” she said. “My mom has a master’s degree in piano pedagogy, and she would play Mozart concertos for me on the piano when I was still in the womb.”

Culbreth is originally from Eastover, North Carolina, and was crowned Miss Durham on March 17, 2018. She says that she has not become fully acquainted with Durham, but hopes city local Maya Bryant will show her around the Bull City.

Bryant, Miss Zebulon 2018, is a Durham native who prides herself on her involvement in the communities of Durham.

“Durham is growing rapidly,” Bryant said. “My mom worked at the Carolina Theater when I was growing up and it really sparked my love in the arts. I loved growing up in Durham and it is great to have a support system of people cheering for your success.”

Bryant currently works at a law firm in Morrisville while also working toward her master’s degree online at Liberty University. She is a graduate of William Peace University and has a bachelor’s degree in communication with a minor in theater.

The Miss America organization is giving Bryant and Culbreth, and thousands of other women, the opportunity to graduate college completely debt-free.

“I want people to know that this is a scholarship competition,” Culbreth said. “There is always going to be a need for strong women in the workforce, and Miss America is helping lift up women for those roles.”

About more than the beauty

Culbreth believes that the Miss America organization is more than just dresses and hairspray. Local state pageants like Miss North

Carolina are giving young professionals and college students the opportunity to make an impact on a large scale.

The current Miss North Carolina, Victoria Huggins, has made almost 300 appearances since winning her title in June 2017. She has visited schools, churches, community meetings and the General Assembly in order to promote her personal platform, The Alz Project: Alzheimer’s Disease Awareness.

Miss North Carolina is also given the job of promoting Children’s Miracle Network Hospitals and the Miss North Carolina Educational Scholarship Fund.

Bryant wants people to know that the Miss America is still relevant in our society today. She believes that the organization is creating a community of people who inspire each other to never give up on any dream.

“I would never be where I am today without the Miss America organization,” Bryant said. “Miss America is making leaders, and people need to know that.”

Every local titleholder is required to choose an issue they feel passionately about to become their platform for the year. These one-year platforms become lifelong missions for the contestants in the Miss America organization.

“My personal platform is The Sticks and Stones Project: Breaking the Stigma Associated with Verbal Abuse,” Culbreth said. “As a verbal abuse survivor, this is an issue that is very close to my heart.”

Culbreth believes that it is vital for schools to implement programs to help school counselors and teachers recognize the signs of verbal abuse victims. It is her goal to have these training programs implemented in every school across North Carolina.

Passion for their platform

A passion for your platform is vital to spreading awareness. Both Bryant and Culbreth



ABOVE: Savannah Culbreth (right) poses with Victoria Huggins, Miss North Carolina 2018, after winning the title of Miss Durham 2018. A first-year at UNC School of the Arts, Culbreth hopes to someday perform onstage in New York. (Photo courtesy of Savannah Culbreth) BELOW: Maya Bryant poses in her sash and crown as the newly crowned Miss Zebulon. She is the first titleholder in 50 years and is seeking a master’s degree from Liberty University while working at a law firm in Morrisville. (Staff Photo by Kelcie Frye)



drew from life experience when it came time to choose their personal platforms.

“My love of the arts began as a kid on the stage of the Carolina Theater in Durham,” Bryant said. “It seemed natural that I would choose to promote the arts and the importance of art education for kids.”

Bryant’s platform is Arts at the Core: Arts Integration. She has partnered with the Towne Players of Garner and is working to raise money for local art programs.

“Growing up in a single-parent household, I often had to receive scholarships to be able to participate in after school and extracurricular programs,” Bryant said. “I want to make sure that every student is given those same opportunities.”

While Bryant is from Durham, she is the first titleholder for Miss Zebulon in 50 years. She is currently planning Zebulon’s very first Celebration of the Arts Festival.

Women like Bryant and Culbreth are using their voices around the state to promote scholastic achievement and extracurricular involvement in programs like Miss America.

It is the goal of Miss America that this job is more than a title; it is a movement. The Miss America Organization is empowering young women to reach for every dream, no matter how big.

“Other people’s shining light doesn’t dim my own. It just illuminates the room,” Bryant said. “This is the biggest thing the Miss America program has taught me. It has created an environment where women are competing for one job, but supporting each other on that journey.”

You can follow Savannah Culbreth (MissDurham_NC) and Maya Bryant (MissZebulon_NC) on Instagram to continue following their journeys to Miss North Carolina.