

Kruse brings courtroom skills to pageant stage

by Meg Fraser

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Erika Leigh Kruse, Esq., has been a practicing attorney for 13 years, is a professor of law and during the day is a cabinet member of the Rhode Island Supreme Court, serving as the director of Alternative Dispute Resolution.

But what she does in her free time might surprise her colleagues.

Kruse is the founder of PageantPrep, a company that provides training for young women looking to compete in the pageant circuit nationwide. She currently manages more than a dozen clients from Rhode Island to Washington State, and this month is being recognized for her work with a spot on the cover of Supermodels Unlimited Magazine.

“I’m very excited,” Kruse said. “I enjoy what I do a tremendous amount.”

She appears on the cover along with four of her clients – all current titleholders. To celebrate the honor, she hosted a party at the 1149 Restaurant in Warwick, where Cranston Mayor Allan Fung presented her with a congratulatory citation.

Despite the fact that Kruse fits pageant work into her nights and weekends, along with a side photography business, she has developed a reputation.

“It’s a small industry so I think I’m pretty well known nationally,” she said.

The Cranston resident started the business about 10 years ago when she began offering interview preparation to her law students. Once that was underway, it clicked for Kruse that the task was not unlike the process of preparing for a pageant. Likewise, she says the pageant stage is not far off from a court of law in some ways.

“You wouldn’t think they’re similar but there are a lot of similarities. You have to be articulate and you have to present yourself well,” she said. “You’re trying to convince one type of judge of a particular argument and have them buy into it and then on the pageant end you’re basically selling yourself.”

Although she has personally participated in just one pageant – a Miss Rhode Island competition in the ’90s where she placed second – Kruse is no stranger to the industry.

“I also grew up in a household where pageants were very much a part of my life,” said Kruse, whose mother was a longtime pageant participant and the third runner up for Miss America. “Coming from a coaching perspective, I think it’s exceedingly helpful to have had a long amount of time in the pageant industry.”

With her knowledge of the competition process, she walks contestants through the pageant step by step. During an initial consultation, she says she assesses the client’s strengths and weaknesses and then starts laying the foundation for the interview segment of a pageant, which she believes is the most challenging aspect. From there, they eventually cover poise and appearance, wardrobe and talent if included in the specific contest, in about six, one-hour sessions. For out of state clients, Kruse condenses the lessons and covers the pageant process in less than a week.

“A lot of people just think, ‘If I buy a pretty dress and I am in shape, I’ll be fine,’ but pageants take a lot of time and they take a lot of energy and preparation if you want to do it right,” she said.

That’s why Kruse believes there are many misconceptions about the pageant industry. The work behind it is brushed aside and contestants are chalked up to being shallow. As a former pageant participant, and also a graduate of the Suffolk University Law School, she says that stereotype couldn’t be further from the truth.

“In any industry you get a couple of bad apples but most of these girls that I work with are phenomenal, articulate, accomplished young women,” she said.

The women that Kruse works with are generally between the ages of 15 and 40. Particularly when dealing with the younger clients, she said that the pageant brings out the best in them, not just because of the discipline it instills, but more so because it makes the contestants look at themselves objectively, perhaps for the first time in their lives. She describes the experience as empowering.

“I’m very blessed to see a lot of these girls transform from shy and introverted and insecure,” she said. “When they exercise leadership skills and they demonstrate their perseverance and drive it can really boost their self esteem. I see a tremendous transformation.”

Many of the young girls who contact Kruse are unsure about the pageant world, but are looking for scholarship money or want to use the competitions as stepping stones to other things, but she says even the skeptics come to see how beneficial the process can be on a personal and professional level. That, she said, is what makes the long days worth it.

“I get tremendous gratification seeing them succeed, so it doesn’t seem like it’s work when you see them crowned at the end of the day,” she said. “I’m preparing girls for what could be a life-changing experience.”

For more information about PageantPrep, contact 270-3713 or visit www.pageantprep.com.

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