

I'm Miss San Antonio USA. Beauty Pageants Are Way Harder and More Expensive Than You'd Think.

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This as-told-to essay is based on a conversation with Lillian Perez, a 23-year-old pageant contestant in San Antonio. It has been edited for length and clarity.

Whenever I was asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” when I was younger, I always had the same answer: “I want to be Miss Texas.”

I had no idea what I was in for as a kid, but it was something that I just knew I wanted.

I remember attending a Miss Del Rio pageant when I was young, but the first pageant I registered for was the Miss San Antonio Teen USA pageant in 2018. I won in the teen category, and my friend and mentor, Alayah Benavidez, won the Miss San Antonio USA crown that year.

Watching someone I knew win made my pageant dreams feel so much more real. I knew I wanted to be Miss San Antonio USA one day, too.

Later that year I competed again and ended up as a semifinalist in the Miss Texas Teen USA pageant.

Five years later, I graduated from the teen category and registered for the Miss San Antonio USA 2023 pageant.

My training schedule was very intense

Perez in the gym. Lillian Perez via BI

I'm also in school studying kinesiology, I teach classes at a Cyclebar studio part-time, and I participate in research opportunities at my school to further my dream of opening my own gym.

My schedule consisted of 12- to 15-hour days and included work, school, training, hydrating, and sticking to a healthy diet.

After training and competing for a year, I won Miss San

Antonio USA in May.

I don't think people realize how expensive it is

Pageants are very expensive to not only enter but also be competitive.

I had to pay for everything, from my wardrobe to my hair, makeup, and nails. There are also several training courses that you need to take, which cost money. It's overwhelming and taxing, and it can be frustrating if you don't know how to approach it.

The Miss San Antonio USA pageant cost me thousands of dollars. The cost pushes you to have a strong work ethic because it's an investment.

Winning Miss San Antonio USA was just the beginning

Perez competing. Select Studios via BI

Being crowned felt surreal. All my training and dedication culminated in the moment I heard my name called. It was challenging not to tear up when I was crowned as friends and family cheered me on from the audience.

Achieving my dream wasn't without sacrifice. I had to work more hours at the cycle studio to cover pageant-prep costs, skip social events to ensure I'd stay on track, and adhere to a strict diet and training regimen to maintain my edge.

After the initial wave of emotion following my crowning, I recognized that my journey had just begun.

I keep myself motivated

One of my favorite phrases to use to keep myself motivated is 'the work continues.' After I won, I immediately started training for Miss Texas USA 2023, which happened in July.

While training, I was still obligated as Miss San Antonio USA to promote health and wellness on my social-media accounts, as well as the sponsors of the Miss Texas USA pageant.

I also had to continue my fitness and diet regimen until I stepped onstage to face the judges.

Sponsorships helped me with Miss Texas USA

One thing that helped me prepare financially was the Miss San Antonio USA prize package.

It granted me sponsorships, and I also reached out to a couple of local business owners on my own and secured private sponsorships from owners in San Antonio and Houston.

My spring semester ended before Miss Texas USA, so I was able to fully dive in and focus on working more to save up and train more during that school-free eight-week period.

I felt calm when Miss Texas USA finally came

I wasn't nervous during the pageant because every second onstage is a second that I'm in my element. I know this is what I'm meant to do.

The Miss Texas USA pageant is divided into an offstage interview, an onstage swimsuit performance, and an evening-gown performance. You don't really have time to be nervous or

to be in your head because it's so fast-paced.

I finished as the second runner-up. That result has motivated me to work harder.

I still have roles to perform

I attend local events and post on social media about how living a disciplined, active lifestyle propels you toward your goals.

One of my personal priorities is to get as many girls to compete in the next pageant as I can. More women should know about the opportunities that come with competing in pageants, even if they want to do it at just a local level.

My participation in pageants has resulted in networking opportunities, including with brands to model for, photographers to work with, and other notable people in the industry.

I've made connections that will help me in my career

What's been thrilling for me is meeting people who are in the physical therapy field because that's the career field I want to enter.

I've also met people who own nonprofit organizations and give me the opportunity to volunteer and engage with the community.

I've strengthened my values through my training and grown my work ethic and desire to improve. While I haven't earned money directly from pageants, which could be used for my dream of owning a gym, the communication and social skills I've gained have been priceless in working toward my long-term career goals.

<https://www.entrepreneur.com/business-news/miss-san-antonio-us-a-beauty-pageants-are-hard-work/465238>