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# Still hoping for 'Here she is...': Despite changing times, Valley contestants value pageant that respects 'inner strength'

## Despite changing times, Valley contestants value pageant that respects 'inner strengths'

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Staff Writer

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With a sprained ankle and eye infection, Florence resident Kimberlee Supernaw competed in March for Miss Western Mass. As she had many times, she lost. But she tried again.

Finally - after losing 12 preliminary Miss Massachusetts competitions in four years before winning one in April - Supernaw will compete tonight to reach the finals of Miss Massachusetts and keep her dream alive to be Miss America.

"Even my closest friends and family don't really understand what I'm doing," the 21-year-old said. "They don't get this idea that I have a one in 16 shot to get to Miss America."

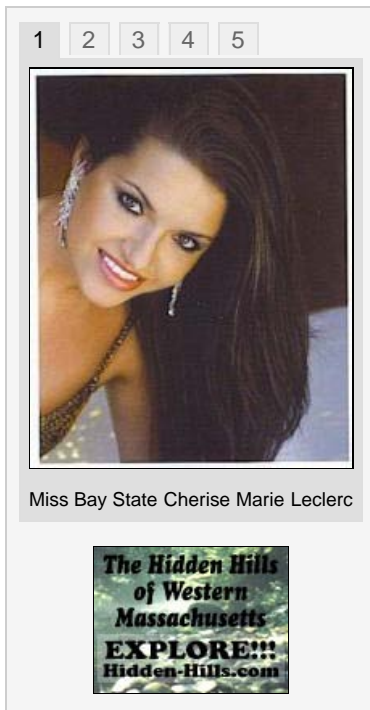
She joins three other Hampshire County women in the 70th annual Miss Massachusetts competition tonight, seeking scholarship money and the opportunity to represent the Bay State next year in Las Vegas at the Miss America Pageant. Local contestants include Supernaw, who is Miss Bay State; Miss Commonwealth Katelin Bolduc, 20, a University of Massachusetts student from East Longmeadow; Miss Pioneer Valley Helen Hua, 21, a Smith College student from Louisville, Ky., and Miss Western Massachusetts Cherise Marie Leclerc, a UMass student from Hampden.

Both the preliminary show, which is tonight, and the final competition Saturday start at 7 p.m. in the restored Hanover Theatre for the Performing Arts in Worcester. Based in Fall River for the past 10 years, the pageant will be held in Worcester for the first time.

Contestants - who won their local competitions to reach the states - perform a talent piece and are interviewed on an array of topics, including their personal platform. The top 10 winners tonight will go on to the final Miss Massachusetts competition Saturday.

Faced with a difficult childhood and financial struggles, Supernaw said she believes the perseverance that enabled her to pay her way through college and pageantry will enable her to succeed at Miss Massachusetts.

"I definitely feel like I belong here," she said. "There are plenty of girls here who would lose one pageant and never try again. It shows how dedicated I am to the organization and how driven I am to



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want to be a part of it."

### **Modernizing Miss Massachusetts**

At 5 feet 3 inches tall, with short hair, Supernaw said she doesn't fit the typical pageant's "ideal image of a 5-foot-7-inch woman with long, voluptuous hair and a voluptuous body." But the Miss America pageant, Supernaw said, finds beauty in inner strengths. Unlike "typical" pageants such as Miss USA, which judges contestants on swimsuit wear and evening gowns, Miss America tallies up talent and interview points.

"In Miss America, you're finding the young woman who is extremely well-rounded," Supernaw said.

Off stage, contestants are encouraged to get involved in their communities and embrace diverse people, issues and events, and share their own opinions, according to Miss Massachusetts spokeswoman Donna Klamkin.

Public "appearances went from the traditional supermarket ribbon-cutting to participating at events like Gay Pride parades and promoting their platforms at the state legislature," Klamkin said.

At the Northampton Gay Pride march in May, the crowd applauded local contestants and took their photographs.

"The community was extremely accepting," said Supernaw, who was asked to judge a transgender pageant in the fall. "We're definitely starting to get in the public eye more and we deserve the publicity. We've been in the works for 100 years."

UMass student Leclerc shared her views about the pageant. "The beautiful thing about Miss America is we are encouraged to have our own opinion and speak to all different kinds of people because this is our job as professional titleholders," she said. "Miss America is trying to modernize itself by really encouraging the girls to spread their wings and share who they are."

A senior at Westfield State College, Supernaw said the scholarship money would help offset her student loans. Her platform, "Enter Here: For a Better Relationship With Your Child," is a Web site that reflects her studies in early childhood education at Westfield State. The site is a forum for parents seeking advice about child behavioral and emotional issues.

"I didn't have a very good childhood growing up, so I wanted to help other families reconnect and have better relationships," said Supernaw, who works in the child lobby at the Northampton YMCA on Prospect Street and is a former nanny.

Hua and Leclerc both chose projects to benefit young girls. Hua designed "Empowering Young Women Through Developing Communication Skills," a program she plans to implement at Northampton High School. The confidence she gained teaching high school girls English in New York City and in her public speaking experience in middle school and high school clubs and on the Smith College debate team inspired her to create the program, which seeks to help girls improve their personal and professional speaking.

"We speak differently than men," Hua said. "I think women sometimes mediate a little more or are afraid to raise their hands ... they don't want to hurt anyone."

Leclerc came up with her platform, "Girls Achieving Active Life Styles," six years ago when she competed for 2006 Miss Massachusetts Outstanding Teen. Leclerc, who placed in the top 10 at that competition, has kept the active lifestyles program running at the local YMCA in Wilbraham and Pioneer Valley Girl Scouts. She teaches girls ages 6 to 13 about achieving a healthy body image and lifestyle.

The Miss Massachusetts Scholarship Pageant is a preliminary to the Miss America Program, the world's largest provider of scholarship assistance for young women, according to the program Web site. More than \$45 million in scholarships was distributed last year at the local, state and national levels. For more information, visit [www.missmass.org](http://www.missmass.org).

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