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Miss Teen USA

Vanessa
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Some Americans were mad as hell at President Bill Clinton during his nationally televised address on the evening of August 17, 1998 regarding the Monica Lewinsky affair. At the Hirsch Coliseum in Shreveport, Louisiana, some audience members had a few angry words for the President, too. "You'd be mad if it was your daughter up there on the stage," a woman complained. "He wouldn't have done that if Chelsea Clinton was up there."

They were fuming that Clinton's speech interrupted CBS's live coverage of the Miss Teen USA pageant, forcing the network to pre-empt the show. Some pageant enthusiasts said Clinton should have checked the TV schedule before making his broadcast.

In any event, the pageant's 18-year-old winner, Filipina American Vanessa Minnillo, was largely unconcerned, conveying the best message on how to deal with being a teenager at the end of the millennium. "Be yourself. Don't give in to peer pressure," she told her local newspaper. "Being a typical teenager is the hardest thing—you need to do it your way."

A few months later at her home in Charleston, South Carolina, she's still savoring the sweet taste of victory. "I would never have expected this," she gushes "This is my second pageant. I didn't know what I was doing. I was there to have fun."

Even when she cracked the top ten, made the cut of five and advanced to the final three, she still couldn't believe her luck. "I now watch the tape and realize I was hyperventilating and I couldn't walk," Vanessa recalls. "I was trying to find my bearings. It still hasn't hit me today. It'll probably hit me when I give it up next year."

It's certainly a heady and busy time for Vanessa. On the weekdays,

she's a senior honor student and head cheerleader at Bishop England High School. She also holds down a job at The Limited in South Carolina. On weekends, she's transformed into Miss Teen USA, crisscrossing the country as a representative of the new, "redefined" Miss Universe Organization

and its sponsors and official charities. The Miss Universe Organization, producer of the Miss Teen USA, Miss USA and Miss Universe pageants, is jointly owned by CBS-TV and real estate magnate Donald J. Trump

As the national spokesperson for The Partnership Against Drugs, Vanessa respects her duty as a role model for youths. "When I stress the importance of staying away from drugs, the kids really do listen because they really look up to me. I'm honored that I can influence people," she says.

Vanessa attributes her natural ability at public relations to a childhood shaped by her stays in California, Nevada, Florida, Europe and now South Carolina. "The traveling added to my life," she says. "It has made me the person I am today. I'm a more open person. I can go to a new school and make new friends and cherish that year, knowing I may move the next year. It hasn't hurt me at all. If I can go back, even with my parents' divorce, I probably wouldn't change anything."

Her parents' divorce? Although she's all smiles on the outside, Vanessa has had her share of sadness.

Vanessa was born on Nov. 9, 1980 to Helen Berecero, a native of Leyte, and Vince Minnillo, who's of Irish/Italian American descent, at Clark Air Base in Angeles City, Pampanga. Vince, who was a U.S. Air Force air crew member, is now retired and works as a courier for Federal Express.

Her parents met in 1973 and married a year later. "(Helen) was going to cosmetology school," Vince recalls. "When I got off work, I saw



there's something about

By Rachelle Q. Ayuyang



Vanessa

True Faith: Vanessa's father, Vince, has always encouraged her to be herself.



her walking home every day. I stopped to talk to her one time. I conned her into riding my motorcycle."

A year after their daughter was born, they came to Los Angeles, along with adopted son Vincent, who's now 20 and lives in Illinois. But Helen and Vince's marriage took a bad turn. Vince likened the crisis to "World War III." The couple separated in 1983 and were divorced in 1986.

Although Helen was awarded custody of their children, Vince saw Vanessa on the weekends. When his daughter had to move to Florida and then to Las Vegas, Nevada with her mother, she visited her father during the summer. Her mother later remarried, and Helen brought Vanessa and her brother to Turkey, where her new husband, a U.S. Air Force serviceman, was assigned. They were living 100 miles from Iraq when the Persian Gulf War erupted in 1990. Helen and her children were forced to evacuate.

According to Vince, his ex-wife promptly returned to the United States, arriving at his doorstep with Vanessa and Vincent in tow, \$100 in her pocket and only one suitcase, since their belongings were still in Turkey. "Their mother said, 'I can fend for myself. But Vanessa needs to be in school and should have a stable life.'" When she dropped them off at my place, I said, 'Of, course, I'll take them.' And then her mother said to keep them for now. But she never came back. We haven't heard from her in six years."

Vanessa essentially grew up with her stepmother Donna, her father's wife of nine years, who became her best friend when she really needed one. "(Our relationship) was very good going through adolescence," Vanessa explains. "In Donna, I have a best friend rather than an adult figure who's my dad."

Vince assumes Helen will reclaim their children, since she fought so hard in court to gain custody of them. While Vince and his daughter have talked about Helen, Vanessa doesn't like to dwell on disappointment. "I'm not mad at her," she says. "If she were to contact me today, I would talk to her."

She has learned to put a positive spin on her difficult moments, drawing a fistful of strength from them: "My dad's happier now. My mom was happier. I was fine. It was probably a little hard. But I got over it, and I'm happier the way I am today. It probably helped me more than anything."

'Realistically, I need a college degree. All this may be a phase, and when I'm old it may fade away.'

Vanessa has also learned to take things in stride. Life and even competition should be fun. While some beauty pageant contestants take competing rather seriously, getting drilled on walking, smiling and responding to questions properly, Vanessa has succeeded largely on a relaxed, unrehearsed style. During the Miss South Carolina pageant two years ago, she wore shorts, sneakers and a sweatshirt

because contestants were told to dress casually. The others, according to Vanessa, were dressed in \$1,000 suits. She won Miss South Carolina and earned a place to compete for Miss Teen USA.

At first, Vanessa was intimidated by the 50 "beautiful, articulate girls with hard-as-rock bodies." But her father told her not to worry and to be herself, that regardless of what happened, she would always be his queen. She took his advice and swept all of the categories, including swimsuit, interview, evening gown and Miss Congeniality before winning the crown. Vanessa also received more than \$150,000 in cash and prizes, including jewelry, clothes, cosmetics, a trophy and \$60,000 in scholarship money.

As beauty queen, she's a natural. "If you saw the pageant, in the bathing suit competition, she's real animated," Vince explains. "During

the interview, she makes these cute little statements and flings her hair back. And then when it came to evening gown, she had her hair pulled back, and she just sashayed on stage, real serious, you know. I asked her, 'How did you know when to act serious and when to act like a kid?' And she said, 'I don't know. I just know how to do it, Dad. It just comes naturally.'

As she contemplates plans for the future, Vanessa has set her sights on attending Duke University. She hopes to meet at least three new people every day on its big campus. The university is also close to home. As a girl who picked up her first pom-poms at the age of four, Vanessa believes it's also a good place to continue her cheerleading. "I try to convince her that at 18, you don't need to make up your mind," her father says. "She's still young. I'm 45, I don't know what I want to do. I've always told her to be what she wants to be".

Vanessa has thought of all kinds of professions to enter, the way some people go through hairstyles. "She wanted to be an orthopedic surgeon for a while until she saw blood and didn't want to do that," Vince laughs.

She then became interested in engineering, but a summer at a Georgia Tech University program turned her off to the field. "This week, it's psychology," adds Vince. "No, she's not one of these kids who at two years old said she wanted to be a doctor and that's all she has thought about."

When it's pointed out to Vanessa that the press release sent by the Miss Universe Organization describes her appearance on "LIVE with Regis and Kathy Lee" as something of a star turn, she's genuinely surprised but admits she's "pretty comfortable in front of the camera." "Maybe it's

in me to be a movie star," jokes Vanessa, who changes her voice and assumes the role of starry-eyed ingenue. "I really love the camera. I love audiences. I love putting on a show."

Like her parents, Vanessa is very outgoing. If there's one thing that Vanessa got from Helen, it's her fun-loving, gregarious nature. "She loves to be around people. She would rather be out doing something than sitting alone at home by herself," recalls Vanessa, adding that when she and her mom were together, they were always either at a party or a friend's house.

Vince adds that his daughter can talk to anybody, from a kid to a general. She also likes to be the center of attention. Whenever she came to a new school, she didn't want to start in the beginning the year. She preferred instead to wait until everyone started and then show up as the "new kid." "And I thought, what a weird kid. But that sums her up the most," her

'I'm not mad at her. If she were to contact me today, I would talk to her,' Vanessa says, in regards to Helen, her Filipina mother whom she hasn't seen in six years.

father says.

Vanessa may have dreams of stardom, but she's also levelheaded. "Realistically, I need a college degree," she says. "All this may be a phase, and when I'm old it may fade away. If I don't have a college degree, I'm in the real world with nothing."

In the past year, Vince has seen his daughter grow in wisdom and in various aspects of her life. "I thought she was a little kid last year," he muses. "Now she's more grown up, more mature. Her time management is so much better. She has so many things, that she had to get better at prioritizing. She still has to say no to people. As a result, she has zero time for herself. All of a sudden you have a million people looking at you, and you're on national TV. But she has certainly risen to the occasion." ■



Fil-Am Pride: Vanessa visiting community leaders in Charleston, South Carolina.