



## Local teen wins beauty contest

*Written by Maggie Caldwell*

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America's Perfect Junior Teen 2009 Raquel Garry, left, presents Sydney Schieffelin with the crown, while America's Perfect Miss 2009 Julianne Pruitt hands her an award. —photo courtesy Jenna Benjamin

Sydney Schieffelin seems to lead the perfect life. The pretty 14-year-old, who will be starting her freshman year at Greenwich High School next week, is a straight-A student and a multi-sport athlete who last year won a prestigious award from the district superintendent for her community service efforts. She comes from a good family and lives in a beautiful home in a secluded Belle Haven neighborhood. A few weeks ago, in front of a crowd of hundreds in Orlando, Fla., Sydney was named America's Perfect Junior Teen, beating out nearly 200 other girls in a fashion show and pageant event, a feat that earned her a college scholarship and opens doors to her in the international modeling world.

However "perfection," she says, is not about looks or pedigree or how well a girl can work the catwalk. It is about poise, confidence and, most importantly, individuality — being the best that one can be by being oneself.

"It is about my dedication to community service," Sydney said. "That's my perfection. Community service and helping others is the most important thing."

Sydney is involved in Roots & Shoots, a youth service organization founded by renowned primatologist Jane Goodall. The group aims to create positive change for people, animals and the environment through service projects and campaigns. At the America's Perfect Junior Teen competition held Aug. 12 to 15, Sydney used Roots & Shoots as her platform, speaking out for the organization in hopes of bringing more awareness to its cause.

The competition itself isn't your everyday pageant, according to its founder Michael Galanes, TV star of WE's "Little Miss Perfect," one of the networks highest rated shows. Mr. Galanes describes America's Perfect Miss pageant as a "fageant," a combination fashion show and pageant.

"There is no stage and no interview with a panel of judges," he said. "There is instead a fashion catwalk, like in New York City's fashion week, and a press conference with 300 media outlets bombarding the models with questions about a specific topic."

He also said the styling for this competition stands out from other pageants. The judges for the event included Ericka Dunlap, Miss America 2004, and Chelsea Cooley, Miss USA 2005, along with designers from top fashion houses around the world. The contestants are granted more free rein to express themselves through the clothes they wear.

"Most girls that do pageants have to stay in a cookie cutter box. Here they are free to wear whatever they feel amazing in," he explained. "We are bridging the gap between modeling and pageantry."



Maggie Caldwell photo

Sydney was crowned junior queen alongside two other young women in the Teen and Miss age groups. She intends to use her title to spread Roots & Shoots' message that "The power of youth is global," something Ms. Goodall told Sydney in person when they met during one of the organization's local events.

Compared to many beauty queens, Sydney is a baby in the pageant world. She has only been competing for two years, appearing in just four pageants, but racking up a total of \$20,000 in scholarship money from her successes. At her first pageant, New England Co-Ed, she won at the state level and moved on to nationals, earning first place in the speech category and finishing eighth over all.

Modeling and pageantry runs in her blood. Sydney's sister, Samantha, an incoming fifth grader, just ended her reign as Sweetheart Queen (ages 7 to 9) in the New England Co-Ed competition. She handed in her crown earlier this week.

Sydney believes her sister, an accomplished gymnast, will compete in the Olympics one day.

Their mother, Stacey, was an international model for 20 years and hosts programs on QVC and HSN (Home Shopping Network) for her YBF (Your Best Friend) makeup line, a company that she runs with her husband, David. Ms. Schieffelin serves on the board of directors of Fashion Group International and is an active member of several cosmetic, design and women-business-owner organizations. Named one of America's "Power Women" by Ladies' Home Journal, she also is on the board of the Miss USA pageant.

Ms. Schieffelin said she was impressed by the America's Perfect Teen competition for its emphasis on personal perfection, and for the kindness the competitors showed each other.

"I thought it would be a cutthroat competition, but Sydney has made so many friends at the pageants," Ms. Schieffelin said. "They aren't really competing against each other. It is about showing how good they can be. It's a competition against themselves."

The girls in the pageant came in all different shapes and sizes, beautiful in their individuality, she added.

"You define perfection and everyone is perfect in their own way. It's a place where girls get to show their intelligence and their passion," Ms. Schieffelin said.

Intelligence plays an important part in the competition, with girls needing at least a 3.5 GPA to be eligible to enter. Sydney's sister queens in the older age groups are star scholars, with one of them enrolling at Harvard Law School.

Being considered for acceptance into pageants such as America's Perfect Teen and Miss USA and Miss America involves hours of filling out applications, obtaining letters of recommendation, and securing sponsorship from groups and individuals who the pageant hopefuls must interview for and convince that they are worth believing in.

The pageants themselves involve hours of preparation from picking out the proper outfits, to practicing interviews, to learning all the moves for the group dance performances.

"There is no messing around for these girls," said Ms. Schieffelin. "They eat three square meals a day and then they are in rehearsal, dancing 12 hours a day in heels. Later they are in hair and makeup and working for hours with stylists."

Through it all, it is the camaraderie of the contestants that really stands out.

"When these girls come together, they are truly happy for each other," Ms. Schieffelin said. "It is a lot like team sports, but with an even deeper connection. If a girl's zipper breaks or she drips foundation all over her dress, other girls are running upstairs to find a different dress, helping her pull it together. You hear about all this bad news about teens these days and seldom hear what is so good about teenagers. This is an example of that."

Although the victory in the pageant world opens many doors to Sydney and Samantha, Ms. Schieffelin said she is just happy to have such well-rounded daughters.

"This modeling opportunity is going to be great for Sydney, but she has her education, too," she said. "It's all about the girls getting a great education. They are bright, bold and beautiful but also humble and outgoing. My husband and I are so blessed."