

Former Miss America contestant: Girls like me don't belong anymore | Perspective

by **Lea Schiazza**, For the Inquirer 06/07/18

I've been around half-naked women most of my life. I figure skated (skimpy costumes), I was a dancer (the best bodies on the planet), and I'm a pageant girl (hello, swimsuit competition). I don't flinch, I don't point fingers, and I don't clutch my pearls.

This week, Miss America's chairwoman, Gretchen Carlson, announced that the [Miss America pageant will no longer involve swimsuit or evening gown competitions](#). People have been arguing for years over the validity of a competition that awards scholarships for T-and-A. Feminists say there is no place for it in today's society. People who have never been in a pageant say that the women are being exploited by walking down a runway in a swimsuit and high heels. And women who are supposed to be supportive of other women's choices, find it all degrading and humiliating.

I say, walk a mile in my high heels and bikinis. I'd like to say two other words to them, but I don't like confrontation or getting beat up.

For as long as I can remember, I have admired the contestants — oh, excuse me, “candidates” — that have strutted their stuff on that famous runway. Whether they won or not, I marveled at their talents, their ability to think on their feet, and, yes, their bodies. They motivated me to become a better all-round competitor. Never did I think I'd get to be one of them, but I worked my butt off, literally, to get there.

I won my first swimsuit competition at my second pageant. And when I won it at Miss Pennsylvania in 1985, I was at my all-time peak of physical fitness. I can tell you that I worked out every single day leading up to that pageant. Of course I practiced my talent and went over current events questions in my head, but it was the swimsuit competition where I busted my behind. And to this day, if anyone asks me — no one ever does, but still — the thing I am most proud of during that time is that stupid trophy. Because I earned it.

Some women are genetically predisposed to having a great body — I'm talking to you, Elle MacPherson — and some aren't. But whether you are short, tall, thick or thin, the discerning eye can tell if you are in shape or not. When I judge a pageant, I don't automatically award points to the girl who has the longest legs or the biggest breasts. I score on fitness. I want to see that you have put in effort. It ain't easy to step away from the plate, go to the gym, and count your macros. And I want to see it.

I'm disappointed that Miss America has nixed the swimsuit competition. I like looking at pretty girls, and I believe pretty girls can be smart, talented, and relevant. Why does Miss America have to change its standards to please people who are never going to like the pageant anyway? Why can't it be called a pageant? When did that become a dirty word?

With this change, is it saying that I'm not good enough? That my swimsuit win negates everything else on that ballot where I scored? I guess I'm not smart or talented because I have a trophy. Girls like me don't belong anymore.

I will always be proud of my involvement, my trophy, my title. I'm lucky that I competed during the heyday of the pageant. Susan Akin, Miss America 1986, probably wouldn't win today because she was a bombshell. She was the girl I stared at all week, wishing I looked like her. She's what a Miss America should look like.

Lea Schiazza was Miss Pennsylvania 1985 and is a graduate of Temple University, where her swimsuit scholarships helped to pay her tuition.