

## Festival Queen Competition more than just Beauty

The Miss Jamaica Festival Queen Competition is not only about highlighting young women with beauty and brains, but young girls who are culturally aware, talented and with a mission to make a worthwhile contribution to national development.

Over the past 37 years, hundreds of young women, queens in their own right, have aspired to be Miss Jamaica Festival Queen through the 13 parish competitions organised by the Jamaica Cultural Development Commission (JCDC). This year, some 13 hopefuls will vie for the national title on Sunday, July 22, at the Indoors Sports Centre in Kingston, and become a cultural ambassador for Jamaica at local and international events. The queen will be chosen just in time to participate in the main celebrations to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of Jamaica's Independence under the theme: 'Jamaica 50: A Nation on a Mission'. Special Projects Co-ordinator at the JCDC, Dr. Pamela Powell, says that a committee, headed by former Miss World, Cindy Breakspere, is working to ensure that the competition is a success. 'We are going to capture the feel of what a Jamaica 50 Miss Jamaica Festival Queen Competition should be like. We are thinking of bringing back some of the past queens who have really made a significant contribution to our country,' she says, adding that the 'Where are they now' segment will highlight past queens, their talent and accomplishments. 'It is going to be nostalgic. We are going to have a great show...right now we are preparing our young ladies and making sure that when they hit the stage, Jamaica will be pleased to see a competition that has nurtured so many young ladies,' Dr. Powell says. So far, the JCDC has successfully hosted the parish competitions islandwide. The final shows were Miss St. Catherine and St. James, held on Sunday, May 20. The competition began in 1963 as the Miss Jamaica Beauty Contest and in 1975 it was revamped and renamed the Miss Jamaica Festival Queen Contest. 'The focus was changed by the government of Jamaica to highlight the contribution that young women between the age of 18 to 25 years can make to community development and who will be role models to other young girls,' Dr. Powell says, while noting that the competition also created a forum for intelligent, culturally aware and poised young women seeking a platform for their contribution to nation building. Additionally, she says, the change was made to counter the negative comments by some women who had participated in international beauty competitions, and experienced 'feelings that there was colour prejudice in the competitions.' 'It was felt that we should copy a competition to replace the Miss Jamaica that would be appropriate and the committee felt that the one that would be appropriate is one that speaks to your contribution to your country, your talent and your involvement in your country,' she points out. Dr. Powell, who is a former Miss St. Elizabeth and first runner-up in the National Competition held in 1975, said she could attest to the importance of the competition and how it has made a difference in her life. That year, the national competition was won by the late Lydia Malcolm, who was Miss Clarendon. Third place went to the late Merva Graham, Miss Kingston. At that time, Dr. Powell was a young graduate of Shortwood Teachers' College and was teaching at the Lacovia High School in St. Elizabeth. 'If I did not win that competition, I would not have the opportunity that I have today,' she recalls. Shortly after her participation in the competition, she was asked to co-ordinate the first CARIFTA Expo that was held in Jamaica. She was the JCDC's parish Co-ordinator and later became the organisation's first cultural organiser for the parish. Soon after, she filled a vacancy as a culinary specialist in the culinary arts department at the JCDC's head office. 'When I came to the JCDC my horizon opened, everything became fast and big. I was exposed to all the cultural areas. I knew about the dance, I knew about the traditional folk forms, I knew about speech, every subject area I can relate to, because it was almost like a university, you learn so much,' she says. From then, the opportunities increased. She obtained a scholarship to study in Toronto, Canada. She also co-ordinated professional culinary arts competitions in collaboration with the Jamaica Hotel and Tourist Association and the Caribbean Culinary Federation. 'I was able to establish a Jamaican culinary team in 1994 and the team is still competing. They have gone and taken Jamaican food on stage internationally and it is through the Festival Queen competition that I was given this opportunity to put Jamaican cuisine on the map,' she says. 'Without the JCDC being a part of my life from the Festival Queen Competition, maybe I might be still teaching at Lacovia. I wouldn't have gotten the big opportunities that have made me so versatile,' she says. Currently, Dr Powell is the Co-ordinator for all hospitality activities organised by the JCDC, including the Independence Grand Gala. She is also a trainer of social graces and etiquette. The training of the contestants is done by persons from the JCDC's head office in Kingston. She explains that after the selection of parish queens, specialists in various areas are invited to assist in training the young women. 'They are expected to do a talent piece. They have to perform on stage at the coronation show and so they get as much help as they can, both at the national level and from the parish level,' she notes. Dr. Powell explains that weeks before the grand coronation, the parish queens will arrive in Kingston to participate in a more advanced level of training and to pay a number of courtesy calls to the Prime Minister, the Governor-General, ministers of government and other prominent persons. During that time, the young women would fine-tune their talent presentations and receive lessons on current affairs issues and visit places of interest. A day before the competition, the young girls participate in a pre-judging session and, according to Dr. Powell, the judges look out for 'cultural awareness, community involvement, leadership qualities and achievements, general knowledge in culture and current affairs.' Other important segments at the coronation are the talent piece performed on stage by the

contestants and the interview session after the top five persons are selected. She notes that the judges look for creativity in the performances, the content, and the delivery on stage. Prizes are awarded for cultural awareness, best performance and best talent, most congenial and the popular vote. Apart from being involved in the pomp and pageantry, the contestants are expected to take part in a community project. Dr. Powell says that it can be a project that impacts children or adults, but it has to be a community project that speaks to her involvement in the community. She adds that a number of queens have worked with young boys and in children's homes. During her reign, the queen is expected to implement a project which is monitored by the JCDC. Additionally, the queen is often invited to various school events, as a motivational speaker or a role model. "On Jamaica Day, she would dress in her Jamaican costume and visit a number of schools to speak to the children and motivate them," Dr. Powell says. The competition forms part of the JCDC's activities to fulfill its mandate of preparing talented young people to accomplish their dreams and to be good role models for other young persons in the society. Source: JIS