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Miss Texas 2006, Shilah Phillips
photo by Chris Fritchie



First-Time Charmer

By Susan Ayala Bland

THERE WERE A LOT OF “FIRSTS” for Shilah Phillips when she was crowned Miss Texas.

Ms. Phillips, who in July competed as Miss Frisco, was a first-time competitor in the Miss Texas pageant and won. She is also the first African-American to be crowned Miss Texas. Another first: winning the scholarship pageant meant, for the first time in her college career, she wouldn't have to struggle to pay her way through school.

“People keep asking me what was going through my mind when I realized I had won Miss Texas,” says the stunning 24-year-old jazz studies major. “I knew I had won a lot of things, but I was stuck on thinking ‘I

can't believe I just won enough money for school!’” She says the \$13,850 scholarship awarded by the pageant program is enough to finally finish the rest of her degree.

Before the competition, Ms. Phillips had been working three jobs to stay in school. She worked at a daycare, performed as a lead singer for a band and booked occasional gigs as a wedding singer. Despite her efforts, she was barely able to cover living expenses and school costs at the Collin County Community College Spring Creek campus. She's recently been accepted to the prestigious jazz studies program at the University of North Texas in Denton, where she hopes to continue her vocal training and get her degree.

Originally from California, Ms. Phillips grew up in Denver, Colorado and attended the Denver School for the Arts. After graduating, she spent a year at Howard University in Washington, D.C., studying in the music program. She and her family moved to Texas five years ago. Her stepfather, Jonathan Nicol, is a civil engineer who helped build the local light rail system. Her mom, Jeanie Nicol, is a Plano interior designer. Tracy, her brother, is a Navy SEAL Diving Medic in San Diego and her sister, Summer, recently graduated from the ballet program at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia.

Ms. Phillips says getting a proper education has always been a priority in her family. However, the lure of a recording contract led her to drop out of Howard and head to Los Angeles.

“I feel like that was a big mistake,” says Ms. Phillips. “Now I always tell students that they should finish school – then pursue their dreams.” After two years, the recording contract never materialized, however she did make it all the way to the Hollywood cut for the hit reality TV show, “American Idol.” She said judge Simon Cowell kept telling her that her best asset was her face. “All I wanted him to do was recognize me for my vocal talent,” she says. She apparently won the skeptical Mr. Cowell over with a rendition of “Unchained Melody,” but still ended up being eliminated during later rounds.

While plans to pursue a music career may be on hold as she represents Texas and prepares for the Miss America competition in January, Ms. Phillips plans to use her talents to their fullest. “I may not make it as a pop star, but I can be an encouragement to other people – I can be a teacher and inspire others to follow their dreams.” Her platform as Miss Texas is “Never Give Up,” and she'll be speaking to nearly 400 schools as part of the pageant's Texas Cares for Children program.

“I truly believe that you can never give up,” she says. “Whether it's on your dreams, your education, your goals – or even yourself. We all have so much to give. It's all there inside us.”

Susan Ayala Bland is a freelance writer living in Frisco.