



Royal Robin

From Pageant Queen to Pilates Princess

BY LINDSAY ROSEMAN • PHOTOS BY L.G. PATTERSON

After an hour of Pilates, Robin Riley Martin looks like a pageant queen. Her long, red hair frames her perfectly made-up face and animated blue eyes. She holds her tall, slender frame up with impeccable posture. Sitting in her Pilates of Columbia studio, the 49-year-

old exercise instructor makes a royal blue sweater and black yoga pants look overdressed.

Twenty-five years ago, Martin *was* a pageant queen. At 24, Robin Riley was Miss Columbia 1987. The title earned the Rock Bridge High School graduate a spot in the Miss Missouri competition, where she told herself she wasn't competing to



Robin Riley's talent performance was an unconventional ballet at the Miss Missouri pageant, reprised at the Miss America contest. <

win the state crown — she was competing to advance to Miss America.

She had almost missed the opportunity altogether. She'd tried — unsuccessfully — for Miss Missouri three times previously. She deemed her pageant days over, and in 1986, packed her bags for Orlando, Fla., where she'd accepted a job as a dinner-show performer in the entertainment division at The Walt Disney Co. Her friends, however, convinced her to give Miss Missouri one more shot (because Martin had only been in Florida for a short time, she was still eligible to compete in the Missouri pageant circuit). She headed home to Columbia and won the Miss Columbia pageant, advancing to the Miss Missouri pageant — and won again.

Moments after the state crown was placed on her head in Mexico, Mo., the judges — who hailed from all across the country — whisked the beauty queen into a room and began a scathing critique. The celebration was put on hold, congratulations would have to wait. A judge from Texas looked at the newly crowned Miss Missouri and said, “Your voice grates me.”

Try to lower your voice, they told her. Speak softly, pleasantly. Don't use your hands so much when answering questions.

Her work was just beginning with preparations for the Miss America pageant. A list of responsibilities — and scholarship money — went along with the

title, so she listened carefully to those who reviewed her performance and adjusted herself as if she were an actress preparing for the role of a lifetime.

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The Miss America 1988 pageant was much different from the Miss America 2012 event, which now calls Las Vegas home for a January contest. Martin's competition took place in September 1987 at Boardwalk Hall in Atlantic City, N.J. Then, women up to 25 years old could compete (currently, the cutoff is 24), and onstage interviews and platforms (causes) weren't required as they are now. But all the trappings of a spectacular event were in evidence — beautiful gowns, stunning swimsuits, outstanding talents and generous scholarships — as they have been since Miss America debuted in 1921 as an effort to drum up post-Labor Day tourism on the Jersey shore.

A lifelong tap, ballet and modern dancer, Martin had majored in dance at Stephens College. She hoped to capitalize on the talent portion of the Miss America contest — an opportunity available only to the women who advance to the top 10.

“At that time we didn't have reality shows,” she recalls. “We didn't have *So You Think You Can Dance*” or anything; it was just a way for a girl like me from

A lifelong tap, ballet and modern dancer, Martin had majored in dance at Stephens College.

Columbia, Mo., to maybe open some doors.” She saw the Miss America competition as a window to show off her dance skills in front of millions of TV viewers.

When the time arrived for host Gary Collins to announce the finalists of the 67th Miss America pageant, 50 women lined the stage wearing black gloves and colorful, strapless gowns. The palette of plum, hunter green, aqua and royal blue hues formed a sea of nerves.

“Miss Maryland, Miss Virginia, Miss Colorado, Miss Texas...” Collins intoned.

There's still time, Miss Missouri thought.

“Miss Louisiana, Miss Mississippi, Miss Michigan...”

Not as much time. Try not to panic.

“Miss Florida...”

Full-on panic.



“Miss Missouri, Robin Riley.”

Anyone can watch this exact moment on YouTube and see her eyes snap shut and her mouth fall open as she shuffles in her fuchsia gown to join the other finalists.

She doesn't remember what she felt like when she woke up that morning or what she ate that day, but she does remember without hesitation that her talent portion lasted 2 minutes and 34 seconds. She performed an unconventional ballet to the “*Funny Girl*” overture and remembers how the judges' jaws dropped as she moonwalked the entire length of the stage in Pointe ballet shoes and a sparkly black and silver costume. “I knew for me to get up there and do something really deep or classical was not me,” she laughs.

But alas, even after giving her best effort in the talent portion, Miss Missouri did not make the top five. She awoke the next morning, pulled the eyelash glue off her lids and asked herself one question: *What do I do now?*

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After participating in the post-Miss America publicity, she returned to Orlando to continue her career at Disney. She was cast in a new show similar to that of Radio City Music Hall's Rockettes. In 1993, she landed the role of Lucy Ricardo in an “*I Love Lucy*” show at Universal Studios Orlando. Freed of the dictates in the pageant world, she could sing, dance and talk however she wanted in her various roles at Disney and Universal. In fact, her voice was the moneymaker in many roles, especially that of Lucy Ricardo.

She married while working in Orlando, and in November 1997, she took on a new role: mother. She and her husband welcomed their daughter, Riley Martin, into the world. “I think [her name] fits her because it's 50 percent me and 50 percent her dad,” Martin says.

After nine years of marriage, though, Martin and her husband divorced. Shortly after, she and Riley moved back to Columbia to be near her parents and siblings, and to help out with the family business (Dryer's Shoe Store, which her dad, Newton Riley, opened in 1956, at the age of 19).

Martin had dabbled in Pilates in Orlando, and had enjoyed the fitness classes that focused on improving flexibility and strength through a series

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of controlled movements. Once she was back in Columbia, she registered for classes at Stephens College and began to take them seriously. The chair of the Stephens dance program suggested Martin become certified to teach Pilates. In an effort to regroup after her divorce and get back to the “old Robin,” she and Riley ventured to New York City. There, Martin auditioned for a two-year apprenticeship with master teacher Romana Kryanowska, who was trained by Joseph H. Pilates himself.

“Romana was *the* person to train with,” Martin recalls. “I said: ‘If I’m going to do this, I’m going to do it right.’ It was a very intense certification, and quite costly, but I’ve never done anything halfway in my life.”

Pilates of Columbia opened in September 2003. Martin teaches in the tradition of Joseph H. Pilates, and gives Columbia residents an intimate and specialized Pilates experience with no more than six or seven students per class. Her studio is tucked away at the corner of Broadway and College Avenue, in an unassuming brick building surrounded by apartments. Inside, Martin is still performing.

Toby Bartman-Callahan and three other regulars walk in for a noon class and collect their thick, cushiony Pilates mats. Martin warns everyone there’s no slipping under the radar in this class. When the series-of-five (a staple of the Pilates workout) begins, Martin approaches her students to ensure they all have the correct form. She adjusts their backs into straight 45-degree angles, turns their lifted ankles out to the side, and pokes until all abs and glutes are clenching at full force.

“No massages this class, too many people,” says Martin, who sometimes offers in-class massages to loosen her clients’ muscles. “We’ll wait until next time.”

Massages can wait because everyone comes back, and everyone’s a familiar face. Bartman-Callahan has been taking lessons with Martin for about 10 months and says she has seen incredible improvement with her multiple sclerosis.

“I had a relapse of MS in January, and my recovery time has been cut by at least a third because of the strength that’s in my body,” Bartman-Callahan

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says. "It's the flexibility and the strength in my powerhouse [core] that's allowed me the mobility I haven't had for the past five years." She has a greater range of motion and feels less pain in her back. However, on this particular day, Martin notices that Bartman-Callahan's flexibility seems off and asks if she's feeling all right.

"She's a giving, loving woman who really, really cares about her clients."

"Let's get you in this week to do some lengthening," says Martin, referring to a series of stretching exercises. This is what Martin loves most: helping people, assisting clients with health and their mobility, offering them somewhere to go that's safe and comfortable. In her small studio, there's no blending in — every student is a friend.

"She's a giving, loving woman who really, really cares about her clients," Bartman-Callahan says of Martin. "Obviously she does it to make a living, but there's altruism there — she's doing it because she really cares about the people she's working with. There are other studios closer to my house, but I will never go anywhere else after what she's helped me achieve with my body."

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Decades after she was crowned Miss Missouri, the sashes, costumes and gowns of Martin's pageant days hang in a closet in her mother's Columbia home. The only items on display are her crowns, which sit — next to her fine crystal — in a hutch she inherited from her grandmother.

"I don't put them on or sleep in them or anything," Martin laughs. "They just represent hard work, a lot of hard work."

When Riley was little, she was thrilled to hear about her mother's pageant adventures and see her crowns. Now that she's a teenager, pageantry doesn't excite her; Riley has no plans to compete in pageants herself. The 14-year-old is, however, a dancer just like her mom. And although Martin could teach her daughter everything, she pays for lessons. Riley's flexibility could use work, and Martin has a studio full of expensive equipment made to improve that, but Riley wants to succeed on her own.

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“She has to find her own path,” Martin says. “She has to find her own thing. I don’t really know what path she’s going to take, she’s only 14.”

In moments of reflection, Martin likens her pageant crowns to a college diploma — something one spend years working toward that is a token of success and hard work, and helps shape the person one becomes. She still puts to use many of the same skills that were pertinent in her memories — most notably, she tries to be her best every day.

Today, crowns, gowns and photos from Martin’s pageant days invoke nice memories. But it’s not just her own pageant days that Martin wants to preserve — she plays an active role in the Miss Columbia Scholarship Pageant. Martin sits on the board of directors and volunteers with the organization. If a contestant needs help training, Martin lends her time and advice free of charge. After all the help she received from others, she says it’s her way of giving back to the system.

>> COLUMBIA'S PAGEANT QUEENS

HEATHER SMITH MERLAK Miss Missouri 1988

First pageant: Miss Mizzou, for which she wore her high school prom dress and won a \$500 scholarship

Talent: Merlak dressed as Charlie Chaplin and twirled her baton to Arthur Pryor’s “Whistler and His Dog.”

Favorite thing about pageants: The volunteers and people; Merlak enjoyed spending time with her host mother, who helped her every step of the way during Miss America. “It was really special staying in a hotel with somebody to care for me and make sure I had what I needed,” Merlak says. “She was very loving, and it was a very fun week. We laughed a lot.”

Skills learned from pageants: “Maintaining poise in the midst of exhaustion, maintaining hope in the face of a difficult economy, maintaining patience and empathy in the face of unrealistic professional expectations”

Current Job: Executive project manager at Maritz Travel

Family: Married with three kids: Ian, 13; John Paul, 7; Allisyn, 5; the family lives in Algonquin, Ill.

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DEBBYE TURNER BELL

Miss Missouri 1989, Miss America 1990

First pageant: Jonesboro High School Valentine's Sweetheart

Reason for entering pageants: To win scholarship money to fund her education; Bell earned a Bachelor of Science in agriculture in 1986 from Arkansas State University and a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree from the University of Missouri in 1991.

Talent: Marimba medley to "Flight of the Bumblebee," "Csárdás" and "Can-Can"

Skills learned as Miss America: Goal setting, tenacity, determination and how to work a room; also learned to be thick-skinned, well-informed and articulate. "I use all those skills to this day in terms of stamina, hard work, meeting different people every day and engaging people in conversation," she says. She traveled 20,000 miles a month, seven days a week and 48 weeks out of the year during her time as Miss America. "I liken it to a presidential campaign," she says. "It was a nonstop, crazy year."

Current Job: Staff correspondent for CBS News in New York City

Family: Married with a 2-year-old daughter, Lynlee

STACIE COOLEY HARKEN

Miss Missouri 2005

Talent: Jazz dance to "Last Dance"

Platform: Physical fitness in teens and adolescents

Reason for participating in pageants: "When I went to college, I gave up dance, and when I heard that the pageant had a talent portion, I wanted to be able to perform again."

Favorite part about being Miss Missouri: "Being able to work with children. No matter what time I woke up to drive to a school to speak to a group of kids — 2 a.m. or 3 a.m. — I always left with a big smile on my face."

Best part about competing in Miss America: "The one moment that took my breath away was the night the live telecast was filmed. As we were standing in the dark waiting for the show to start, they showed flashbacks up on the big screen from the past 75 years of every Miss America who was ever crowned. I thought, 'Oh my gosh, in three minutes I'm going to be a part of history.'"

Current Job: Kansas City district manager at Alcon, an eye-care company

Family: Married with a 2-year-old son, Huntley, who has already been to see the Miss Missouri pageant twice ■



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