



Photo courtesy of KRT Campus

Gage Gatlyn waits to be crowned Mr. Gay 2005 on Sept. 5 in Hickory, N.C. Competitive drag king pageants are becoming more popular.

Competitive drag kings strut stuff

With some spit and polish, women perform in growing world of cross-dressing pageantry

Jen Aronoff
KRT CAMPUS

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — At a Hickory, N.C., watering hole, the bearded singer belting out Lonestar's "Amazed" before an adoring crowd wore jeans, a Western-style shirt, a black cowboy hat and a sash.

Which explains why the crowd shouted, "You go, girl!" The singer, as it turned out, was the reigning "Mr. Gay USA For Male Impersonators," kicking off this year's national pageant for "drag kings."

For women who perform as men in a world where "she" is called "he," the title is as big as

it gets on a competitive level.

The September finals at Hickory's Club Cabaret drew 17 kings from across the country, mostly from small towns in the South and Midwest. The contest is in its fifth year, said club owner Jeff Reeves, who owns the rights to the title and decided to bring it to his hometown.

Participants were judged on formal wear, talent and personal interviews, and even had platforms, which were more along the lines of "to make people realize it's fabulous to be a king" than the cliched "world peace."

The official prize is \$500 and

a year's reign, but there's great camaraderie among contestants, and something deeper and personal at stake.

"When I'm up there in drag, I feel like a completely different person, like I'm invincible," said Dylan Gauge, 19, from Ohio and in his third show.

J Micheals, the 2003 winner, supported daughter Micheal J, 28, and the other contestants from Missouri. "The Show-Me state, and my girls are gonna show 'em!" said Micheals, who cites Toby Keith as inspiration. "Excuse me, my boys are gonna show 'em."

The mechanics are often the main reason it's not easy being king. To create facial hair, kings meticulously apply clippings of their own hair with spirit gum. And then there's "binding

down," which is exactly what it sounds like.

The secret? "Saran wrap and duct tape, baby!" Micheals said.

Most performers lip-sync, and musical numbers included dance classics, show tunes and category-defying extravaganzas.

Totally un-ironic country, though, was most popular, and the early round featured four Tim McGraws. One of them, Gage Gatlyn, 28, of Jacksonville, Fla., sang what had to be two octaves below normal and, with a chest-baring, sparkle-trimmed button-down, clearly needed no plastic wrap or duct tape.

Gatlyn wowed the crowd, and the judges: two days later, he was overwhelmingly crowned the winner.

Latina joins cancer battle

Jerry Berrios
KRT CAMPUS

MIAMI — Colombian singer-songwriter Soraya wants to give hope to women with breast cancer.

She survived, she says. They can, too.

"I can be their voice," Soraya said.

The 36-year-old Latin Grammy winner especially wants to break the code of silence among Hispanic women that often prevents them from seeking timely treatment.

This year, an estimated 211,240 women and 1,690 men in the United States are expected to be diagnosed with breast cancer. An estimated 40,410 women and 470 men will die from it, according to the American Cancer Society.

Soraya's mantra is clear: Early detection is key; treatments are advancing; and support systems do exist.

"It's better to know early on when you have lots of options," she said.

Soraya's mother, aunt and grandmother died of breast cancer. In 2000, when she was diagnosed with advanced breast cancer, she wanted to keep her story private.

But the letters and e-mails she received changed her mind. She heard from women who said they feared treatment because every woman they knew who got treatment had died. Others said if they had a mastectomy, their husbands would leave them.

She knew she had to speak out through the media and through her music.

"I am not going to be part of the problem," Soraya said. "I am not going to be part of that tradition."

Soraya, who lives in Miami, is a spokeswoman for the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation, and during September and October takes a break from her music career to focus on breast cancer awareness.

Ines Rodriguez, a breast cancer survivor and oncology nurse from Davie, Fla., said Soraya is her role model.


"She opened the door that few people had even knocked on," said Rodriguez, 44.

Like Soraya, Rodriguez talks about her experience everywhere she goes.

Dr. Sandra Franco, co-director of the Memorial Breast Cancer Center at the Memorial Cancer Institute in Hollywood, Fla., and Pembroke Pines, Fla., said some patients who grew up in Latin America fear diagnosis and treatment.

"There is a feeling in these patients that breast cancer is a more deadly disease than it really is," said Franco, who is Colombian.

Latin American countries don't have massive breast cancer screening campaigns. Treatment, drugs and support groups are less available than in the United States, she said. The message about early detection isn't trumpeted. In Colombia, 80 percent of the cancers diagnosed are at an advanced stage, Soraya said.



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