

Awh
of s



no one lot sparkle

BUILD program alumna Mikayla Holmgren makes history as the first woman with Down syndrome to compete in a Miss USA state pageant.

Mikayla Holmgren competes in a royal blue gown on the stage of the 2017 Miss Minnesota pageant where she received "The Spirit of Miss USA" award. | Photo submitted by Sandi Holmgren



Mikayla Holmgren, 2018 Bethel BUILD Program alumna, has her hands full with modeling, dancing, competing in pageants and most recently, competing for the Sports Illustrated swimsuit edition cover. Holmgren says she does not put limits on herself and says she is a strong woman with ‘a little Down syndrome on the side.’” | Photo by Vanna Contreras

By Makenzi Johnson

Mikayla Holmgren, Bethel alumna, springs up from her chair with a gleeful laugh to grab two cases from her closet that hold her pageant crowns. As she pulls the many tiaras from the boxes, light filters through the diamonds, creating patterns all across her bedroom walls. Still, Holmgren’s face shines brighter than these diamonds. The chance to show her crowns is a chance to showcase just how hard she’s worked over the past few years.

As a 26-year-old woman with Down syndrome, Holmgren has not let anything hold her back from the things she loves.

“I have Down syndrome, but I’m a dancer, I’m a public speaker [and] I’m a college graduate,” Holmgren said.

Holmgren graduated from Bethel’s BUILD program in 2018, and is one of the many members of her family to attend Bethel. At Bethel, she mentored other students, attended Chapel, was a part of the Pray First team and loved to attend late nights in the DC with her friends. The two years spent at Bethel helped to give her the push she needed to get involved in the world of pageants after a friend from school brought up the idea of pageants to her.

In 2015, Holmgren received a packet in the mail about a pageant for women with special needs, the Minnesota Junior Miss Amazing pageant. She entered the pageant looking forward to learning something

new and left with a newfound passion for the world of pageants. In 2017, Holmgren became the first woman with Down syndrome to compete at Miss Minnesota USA. She later won two awards for being the first woman in this pageant, the Miss Minnesota USA Spirit Award and the Director's Award. Holmgren is planning on running again in this summer's Miss Minnesota USA Pageant. She already has her gown chosen and hung on her clothing rack, a long white and nude gown with sequins and sparkles decorating it - the more sparkles the better.

"It fit me like a glove," Holmgren said about her pageant gown, "I put it on and was like, 'oh yeah, that's the one.'"

Participating in pageants is more than just walking across a stage with a smile, it's spending months preparing - interviews, picking out a gown, finding the right hair and makeup, and practicing walking in high heels. Her reason for doing it all is simple, she gets to make a difference by doing something she is passionate about.

"It's something fun that I really love," Holmgren said.

Being able to participate in the various pageants is a joy to Holmgren, she gets to compete in them with her friends and gain experience to even further propel her into her career.

"All my friends have special needs and that brings the awareness and it inspires others. It makes people feel happy and feel more joy," Holmgren said.

Bringing awareness for special needs, especially in women, is a big focus for Holmgren. Her theme for her platform and campaign being, "dreaming big without limits." The phrase started with just "dreaming big", but she added on the latter half because she feels it is important for people to realize that having a disability should not put limitations on what she does.

"A lot of times those with special needs have limits and they're not allowed to go and get their dreams ... so that's kind of how it came up," Sandi Holmgren, Mikayla's mom, said.

Her parents, Sandi and Craig Holmgren, knew from the moment Mikayla was born that they weren't going to let Down syndrome force them to shelter or protect her from exploring or finding new opportunities.

"We don't want to label her, I look past her disability. If she was a typical 22, 23, 24, whatever year old, would we put limits on what she would do? Because she's an adult and she'd make her own decisions... we want her to be looked at as Mikayla and not somebody with Down syndrome," Sandi said.

Her campaign has led her to even more opportunities than pageant competitions. Along with pageantry, Holmgren was asked by some big name companies, Sephora Beauty, Sigma Beauty and the local Rosedale Center shopping mall, to do modeling campaigns for their brands.

"I mean, I just love to model," Holmgren said.

She was able to take her love for both pageants and modeling to the next level by hosting fashion shows in order to raise money for her campaign and Best Buddies, an organization that Holmgren has been a

part of for several years now that focuses on creating opportunities for people with disabilities. The fashion shows, occurring over the past two years, have been made possible through the help of local business. Stillwater, where the event takes place, boutiques lend clothing to the models, give participants goody bags and special VIP treats at the event. Holmgren was also able to incorporate her love of dancing - which she has been doing since she was six years old - by ending the event with a solo number. This year, the fashion show was held virtually due to COVID-19.

Holmgren's love of pageantry and fashion has propelled her into her latest endeavor, which involves a much bigger stage than she's used to. Holmgren is currently competing to be the first woman with Down Syndrome to appear in the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit edition.

Deciding to submit her casting tape for the SI Swimsuit Search was something completely different and new for Holmgren and her family to be a part of. It was an opportunity that she just couldn't pass up.

"It's there, it's right in front of me and I just want to do it... I wanna try something new," Holmgren said.

Instead of choosing a sparkly, royal blue gown, Holmgren chose a white and navy striped bikini. The process was different than preparing for a pageant, the preparation for this was practicing a script she read off for her audition tape sent to the Sports Illustrated team, working out, choosing the swimsuit and finding a hair and makeup team. It was a challenge, but one Holmgren was excited to learn about.

This experience is especially important for Holmgren because it gives her an even larger platform to spread her message of inclusivity and diversity for people with disabilities.

"It gives a good message... it makes a difference," Holmgren said. C

Mikayla Holmgren's pageant career

2015: Minnesota Miss Amazing
- won Junior Miss Division

2015: Minnesota Miss Amazing
- Nationals

2017: Miss Minnesota USA -
won Director's Award and Spirit
of Miss USA award

2018: Miss Minnesota USA -
won Miss Congeniality award

2019: Minnesota Miss Amazing
- won Miss Division

2019: Minnesota Miss Amazing
- Nationals



One of Holmgren's many tiaras from various pageants she has competed in, the Miss Minnesota USA, Miss Amazing, etc. sits on a dresser in her room. Other memorabilia such as pictures of friends and family or Bethel nametags and merch lie atop the wood along with the pageant awards. | Photo by Vanna Contreras