



Miss Divali Nagar Queen 2017 Seema Moonilal (centre) is flanked by Suvina Smolsky (left) of Canada who placed second and Navina Misir of USA, who placed third. PHOTOGRAPHY: ANIL RAMPERSAD

Preparation for last Monday's pageant was spearheaded by the event's coordinators, Leanne Dookie and Neel Ramoutar; both of whom Seema says were influential in the grand production. As she shares, the opening introduction dance was choreographed by Mr Ramoutar and Ms Dookie offered training to the delegates on their expression and personal audience introductions, as well as how to model their saris with "grace, poise, and confidence."

"The camaraderie among the delegates was wonderful," she gushes. "Everyone mingled and fit in perfectly with each other, as well as the NCIC team. We all respected and assisted each other in any way possible," she describes the soul of sisterhood that was in the air, despite the pageant being a competition.

Through the experience, Seema gained more confidence in her own abilities and she knows it has made her a stronger woman. "Whenever I felt overwhelmed with the task of balancing both school and the pageant, I always remembered what the ultimate goal was and I never gave up," she says, adding that this goal was to make her family and loved ones proud of her accomplishments in a sphere so specific to their religious beliefs and tradition.

However, the road to the pageant was not completely devoid of its share of personal challenges for the reigning queen. As she reveals, days before the competition's semi-final leg, her grandmother passed away.

"This was a difficult time for me because we were very close," she says. She also had to battle feelings of discouragement in continuing, "but recalling her genuine happiness for me knowing I was taking part in the competition inspired me to have the courage and determination to make her proud."

This resilience of spirit and tenacity is represented in Seema's personal mantra: "Be bold, be brave, be strong, but most of all, be a woman of worth." Her faith has also helped her through times of adversity and given her strength in quiet moments. It is also this faith that has helped her persevere, no matter the obstacle, "because God has a plan that is destined for all of us." It is this mindset that has helped her through every significant life chapter and occurrence. "I will continue believing that by prayer and hard work, anything is possible."

A Biomedical Technology student, she is on the path to becoming an educated, independent, and successful woman in society – all goals and titles she has set for herself. She is also motivated to be a shining example for her younger sister, who she says inspires her every day.

"I have a great passion for encouraging women to love, respect, and believe in themselves because they are the bearers of our future," she refers to her dedication to her fellow women and girls.

In the future, she would like to work with the Cancer Society of TT to help educate and raise awareness, with a special focus on youth, having lost one of her own close relatives to ovarian cancer. She would also like to start a foundation of her own, with the specific goal to uplift and help give direction to women in our society.

"To all young women and men, I urge you to never stop educating yourself," she says of what she believes is the most powerful weaponing our future generations can arm themselves with. "An educated mind is one of the most powerful things you can possess in this world."

"Always love and encourage each other."



Miss Divali NAGAR QUEEN

Seema Moonilal: A Woman of Worth

By James Dupraj

Winner of the International Miss NCIC (National Council of Indian Culture) Divali Nagar Queen Pageant 2017 is Seema Moonilal. The young woman from Penal says she grew up in an extended family, including her parents, younger sister, and grandparents.

"I was exposed to my East Indian culture at a very young age and was brought up in a traditional household," Seema says of the religious and cultural teachings of Hinduism she has known since childhood.

A lover of dance, makeup artistry and fashion, and nature, she is passionate about promoting her

East Indian roots as it contributes to an influential part of her identity. More than simply a title, she once viewed her Miss Divali Nagar Queen 2017 crown as an unattainable goal: "It is something I never thought I would become but I am honoured and very excited to embark on this journey," she says of the title, which she took home at the pageant last Monday at the Divali Nagar site in Chaguanas.

"This was way beyond my comfort zone but it just goes to show the endless possibilities that can occur if you just take the risk and believe in yourself." Her parents and sister were also motivating factors for her entry to this year's pageant, as their unwavering support also pushed her to compete.

Topping contestants from five countries, including Canada and the US, the UWI student says she hopes her win will encourage our nation's youth to promote

and preserve identifying traits and traditions of our indigenous cultures.

"I believe our culture is our identity, and I would like to be a role model for girls to see their full potential and encourage women's empowerment," she adds of the work she would like to embark upon with her crown.

"I think the pageant is important because it portrays the talent and intelligence of young women who are proudly displaying aspects of their Indian culture," says Seema, alluding to the Miss Divali Nagar Pageant's penchant to bringing awareness of East Indian and Hindu traditions with an entertaining approach, to reach a wider audience. She says it is this focus on Hindu traditionalism that is the pageant's crowning jewel: an opportunity to educate and expose our diverse and multicultural population, as well as on an international scale.



PHOTO COURTESY SEEMA MOONILAL