

Former Beauty Queen Uses Platform to Reach Children

Susan Cagna says her title as Mrs. U.S. Beauties opened doors for her to encourage and pray for sick children

A Tennessee woman who turned her back on a glamorous career as a runway model after accepting Christ says God has used beauty pageants to give her an unconventional ministry platform.

Crowned Mrs. U.S. Beauties in 2003, Susan Cagna, 37, has spent the year of her reign bringing moments of sparkle to sick children in hospitals and whispering prayers in their ears. The visits, she says, are God-given opportunities for her to lay hands on children by way of hugs and pray for their healing.

“If someone thinks you’re special, even for a moment, they’ll listen to you,” Cagna said. “So with a crown on my head, I share God’s love.”

Cagna says she grew up embarrassed by her gawky height and flat chest, hanging on to compliments at ballet recitals to offset the self-critical voice in her head. She was so afraid of speaking in public that, when forced to, she would babble incoherently. Boys hardly noticed her.

Then she stumbled into the world of glamour. Having been told she was photogenic, she entered the Seventeen magazine Look of the Year contest. Out of the 75,000 applicants, she ended up in the top six. She was presented with a contract and plane ticket to Puerto Rico. Her father wouldn’t agree, but Elite

Agency had spotted her, and after graduating from high school she entered their modeling school in Los Angeles.

There she was taken aback by the sad self-absorption of the models. So when she went home for the holidays during her second year and her sister presented the gospel to her, she was ready. "I knelt in the bathroom and gave my life over to God," she said. "A warmth ... poured all through my body down to my toes."

When back in Los Angeles Cagna, then 19, was offered a job as a runway model in Paris. It highlighted how her feeling of self-worth had changed in a prayer. "I had this sense that I was wrapped in God's love, and 'You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body' came to mind. I headed home to Alabama."

She went to college, then Bible school, got married and gave birth to a daughter, Sarah. Then one day she saw a pageant for married women on television. A search on the Internet led her to a Christian-based pageant. At the age of 35, she ballet-danced her way into the Mrs. Tennessee crown in September 2002, which a year later put her backstage at the national competition.

"I stood behind the curtain white-faced, frozen with fear," Cagna said. "Another more seasoned contestant came over and gripped my arm: 'You have just one shot to share what's on your heart and tell the judges why you want this title. That's all—just one.'"

Cagna said the woman's words jerked her back to her mission. From the year of visiting children around her state as Mrs.

Tennessee, she said she realized that what had the greatest impact on her was talking one on one with the children in hospital rooms.

She was called on stage, and she said she suddenly felt as if she were walking into a room full of friends. "In one word, what would you bring to this pageant system?" the judges wanted to know.

"Without the fear, it was like my head and my heart connected. I heard myself answer in a voice that was both gentle yet firm: 'Integrity,'" she said.

In the last year, Cagna has visited six major hospitals across the country in her gown and crown. Ailing children light up in her Cinderella-like presence, and she lets them try on the crown and get a picture. Embracing them, she whispers a prayer. Sometimes whole families in distress join her in prayer.

Other times the children are aloof. She remembers one little boy who wouldn't look at her despite her comment on his beautiful eyes. She stayed and told him how brave he was and how soon he'd be better, but it was clear he wouldn't respond. "It was when I was turning to leave," Cagna recalled, "that I saw the tears streaming down his face."

Diane Wozniak, who founded the U.S. Beauties Pageants in 2001, said queens typically are expected to promote the pageant. "But I knew this is what God wanted for Susan, so I didn't step in," Wozniak said. "When Susan goes to heaven she'll find out how many souls she touched and lives she changed by what she did this past year. She was truly an instrument of the

Lord.”

As Cagna relinquishes the crown, she'll go on to teach children the art of worshipful dance at her charismatic church, Christ Church in Nashville. In yet another way, she'll be honoring God with her body and touching the lives of children.

Marsha Gallardo in Nashville, Tenn.