

Former Miss America reflects on city she and competition call home

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ATLANTIC CITY — Cold air blows across the Boardwalk and a small pile of snow has yet to melt in the shade near a statue of Miss America, but that's not what Suzette Charles says gives her chills.

The former Miss America grew up in the city and remembers the countless parades that marched down the Boardwalk. Her cousins even helped build some of the floats.

“When I come on this Boardwalk, I remember all those things,” she said. “Every spot in this town, on this Boardwalk gives me chills.”

Charles, 55, enjoys looking back on the city's past and the days when it was synonymous with the Miss America Pageant. But while her love for the city remains firm, Charles has lost faith in the Miss America Organization's leadership.

The MAO, however, stands by its recent attempts to improve its relationship with Atlantic City and charges critics such as Charles with “actively working to irreparably harm the organization.”

Just inside the walls of the building behind her, Charles sang for a full audience when she competed as Miss New Jersey in the 1983 Miss America pageant.

She was named first runner-up but served seven weeks as Miss America after Vanessa Williams forfeited her crown over a nude-photos scandal.

Bill McCullough, who still runs the modeling agency in Atlantic City that his mother, Marie, founded in 1946, recruited Charles in 1979 to start competing in pageants.

“She had a beautiful face, a great personality and she was smart. That's basically what you need,” he said.

Charles credits Atlantic City for not only fostering her success as a contestant but for the Miss America Organization as a whole.

“This town has upheld this almost 100-year-old tradition based on the community. The community is what has housed Miss America in their hearts,” she said.

However, she now feels the Miss America Organization has allowed a once-supportive network of local businesses and volunteers to unravel.

“The organization should be run as a business, and it hasn't been,” she said. “I don't blame the community for having a funny taste in its mouth from Miss America.”

The Miss America Organization denied these allegations in a statement and said it began reaching out to re-establish relationships with the citizens, businesses and political leaders of Atlantic City last January.

“For the first time, budget documents were shared with CRDA, the organization joined the local chambers, visits were had with the mayor and other community leaders, and Miss America herself visited with fire and police leaders and others who had been longtime donors to the program,” the MAO stated.

Charles said the organization has become too dependent on funding from the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority. A three-year, \$12 million contract between the CRDA and the MAO expired last year. CRDA officials said in December they had not discussed any proposals to fund the pageant going forward.

“They (MAO) should be ashamed of that,” Charles said. “They should not ask Atlantic City for one dollar to run this organization here. They should be giving back to the community.”

The MAO said Charles, who is not a member of the organization’s board of trustees, has no insight into its operations or the work of its board.

“It is interesting that Suzette chooses to talk about the financial support needed for the program as she has been an active participant in the attempts to create the chaos that has kept the program from garnering just that,” the MAO stated.

The organization did not agree that it accepts “handouts” from the CRDA.

“While many don’t agree with CRDA’s support of the organization, there was a contract in place that had been negotiated three years prior between the parties, and while Miss America is grateful for that support, the organization met the terms of that contract,” the MAO stated.

Although Charles did not serve on the MAO board, she did serve as its liaison to Atlantic City last year.

In that position, she helped create a scholarship for Atlantic City High School students and offered ideas such as a golf outing and a 5K run to raise money. But even then, she said, she was not heard by the board.

The organization, however, said Charles did not make proper use of her position.

“If Suzette and the small group of others who are actively working to irreparably harm the organization would work productively with the hundreds of volunteers around the country who don’t ask for power or a title or board seat to do the work necessary to bring the things about Suzette says she would like to see, progress could be made,” the MAO stated.

Putting her face into the sun on the Boardwalk, Charles took a moment to mention how fresh the air always feels by the ocean.

She likes to breathe it in on runs along the Boardwalk whenever she returns from her current home in New York. Sometimes, she will run to the end and back, an almost 11-mile distance she just can’t seem to do as easily anywhere else.

“I just feel at home here,” she said.