

A Brief History of the Miss Ebony Pageant at Indiana State University: 1970 to the Present

By Crystal Mikell Reynolds, Ph.D.

Before there was a Miss Ebony, there was a Miss Black ISU. In the wake of the modern day civil rights movement in the United States, college campuses were changing all across the country, and Black students on predominately White campuses would no longer accept the status quo.

The newly established Black Student Union (1968) at Indiana State University (BSU) had as one of its platform items the elevation of the Black woman. As Black women were relegated to a second class status across the nation, taking its lead from the Black Panther Party, Black men in the BSU at Indiana State University saw it as their mission to elevate, celebrate, honor, and respect Black women (Dixon, 9/2/18). The Miss Black ISU Pageant would be the vehicle to do just that.

In its original form the Miss Black ISU pageant incorporated African centered themes and customs. It was a celebration of African Americans' African roots. Co-sponsored by the Black Student Union and the African American Cultural Center (sponsorships that continued for many decades) the first pageants had the young ladies sport traditional African attire, give interviews that showcased their social and political platforms, and perform their unique talents in a talent competition.

In March 1970, Eugenia Walker received the honor of being the first Miss Black ISU. The crowning of Walker was a proud moment for African Americans on ISU's campus as Black students had their very own Black Queen.

Throughout the 1970s, the Pageant continued to be immensely popular among Black students, with the name of the Pageant changing to "Miss Ebony" in 1972. The event would typically be held on the Friday night of homecoming weekend at Tilson Music Hall and on occasion, the auditorium at the University Lab School. In 1972, Linda McClendon became the first Miss Ebony, reflecting the new name of the Pageant. Soon after her crowning, for personal reasons, Walker relinquished her title to South Bend native Lynn Free, the first runner up. In 1973, Lynn Free went on to compete on the state level becoming Miss Black ISU. Ms. Free then went on to represent ISU on the national stage in the Miss Black USA Pageant. In 1973, Thora Evans of Gary graced the stage and was crowned the winner.

Regina Taylor, freshman from East Chicago, won the 1974 Miss Ebony Pageant honors. And, in 1976, Social Science Education and St. Louis native Denise Cummings took top honors. The years 1977 and 1978 saw Deborah Fox, a senior textiles and clothing major from Gary and Lisa Cheatham, a senior journalism major and a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha grace the stage, the year 1977 having a record low of 6 participants, however (*Shadow Rap*, 1977, vol 6, issue 11). In 1979, sophomore Jeanna Conner of Cassopolis, Michigan, won the honors competing among 9 other contestants.

The 1980s witnessed the continued popularity of the Pageant with journalism major VaLynda Robinson, a Rochester, New York native, taking home the crown in 1980. During that pageant, 14 young women vied for the title, a record high for the pageant at that time.

In 1981, Carol Reed, an Indianapolis sophomore and business education major, made her hometown proud in front of a Miss Ebony crowd of over 400 (*Shadow Rap*, 1981, vol 2, issue 1). This Ebony Majestic Choir member sang a moving gospel song. In 1982, Michele Breveard of South Bend, Indiana claimed the top prize. In the early decades, the prizes consisted of the winner getting no more than a monetary prize of \$100.00 or a television set with the court getting lesser prizes (Brown, 9/5/18).

In 1983, Crimsetta Dunn, performing a skit entitled “Low Down,” took top honors (*BSU Newsletter*, 1983, vol 5, issue 2). She then competed in the Miss Expo Pageant on the state level, the Miss Expo becoming one of two “post-Miss Ebony venues” for that year’s winner to compete in. The year 1983 witnessed a new pageant at Indiana State, the Mr. Ebony Pageant (Today, it is referred to as the “Essence of a Man” competition). The Pageant was sponsored by the Black Student Union and the first Mr. Ebony was Conorsville, Indiana, senior Terrance Chaney, a member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity and the ISU’s baseball team (*BSU Newsletter*, 1983, vol 3, issue 3.).

In 1984, the Pageant reached way down South for its winner with Melissa Avery of Atlanta, Georgia winning the crown and becoming the first winner from that city. According to this author’s research, this theater and communications major is believed to be the first graduate student to win the honors.

In 1985, AACC Administrative Assistant Julia Bruce became the coordinator of the Miss Ebony Pageant. She remained in this role until 2010. During these years, the Pageant was scored in three sections: Interview (25 points); Talent (50 points); and Question and Answer/ Evening Gown (25 points). The contestants also had patrons’ lists. The contestant who brought in the most money received 10 bonus points. In addition, Master of Ceremonies(MC) were either previous Miss Ebony winners, Black Student Union members, or the winner of the Miss Indiana Pageant (Bruce, 9/5/18). It is unknown at this time who the MCs were in the years prior to 1985. In 1987, Senior Adrienne Morris of Gary, Indiana became one of the last winners of the decade.

The 1990s saw the ever popular Pageant become even more popular. Faculty and staff who were new to the campus were asked to serve as judges for the event, which had been the practice in prior decades (Brown, 9/4/18). In 1990, Ladonna Sherls walked the Miss Ebony stage as the decade’s first winner. Then in 1991, Madison, Indiana native and political science major/theater minor Twyla Jenkins brought a sense of grace to the Pageant with her great poise and amazing interview skills. She would go on to become a Miss Indy 500 Princess and then compete in several state and national pageants (Jenkins, 9/6/18).

In 1994, winner Tanya Cochran, a speech language pathology major from Peru, Indiana, mesmerized the audience with a classical piano performance.

In the new millennium, the Pageant continued to be strong and vibrant. In 2001, Kristle Roscoe, Indianapolis sophomore, accounting major, and presidential scholar took top honors.

In 2010, unfortunately the Pageant went on a 4-year hiatus but returned joyfully in 2014 under the mentorship of the Julia Bruce, C.E.B. African American Cultural Center and the Office of Diversity.

Youstina Nussar, a native of Egypt and a freshman civil engineering major, was crowned the 2014 Miss Ebony. Nussar had as her platform the empowering of all women. In 2015, Jalyne Messer who competed with 13 other contestants, took home the top prize and accompanying scholarship. This Indianapolis native and human development and family studies major had as her talent a photographic exhibit highlighting her artistic talents.

Due in part to the renovations of the African American Cultural Center in 2015 and 2016 and the temporary relocation of the Center, the Pageant took a short hiatus. However, the Pageant returned in 2018 under the sponsorship of the Office of Multicultural Student Services.

Today, the competition termed “Miss Ebony Scholarship Pageant” with a top prize of \$1500.00, contains the following categories: private interview with judges, interview attire, talent, evening wear, and onstage interview. These categories provide the participants with an opportunity to display their diverse talents. Consistent with the spirit of its founders, the Pageant remains vibrant and open to all women and elevates, celebrates, honors, and respects women.

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