

Frisco's own **Shilah Phillips** will compete in the Miss America pageant on January 29. The singer and self-described "local girl" tells Britney Porter about her road to the national spotlight.



What you don't know about Miss Texas

She loves carbs; she was born on Friday the 13th; and she sported a previously worn bathing suit in the 2005 Miss Frisco competition. Yes, worn. Shilah Phillips represents Miss Texas like no other. In fact, she became the first contestant in more than 20 years to win Miss Texas on the first attempt, and she became the first African-American woman to win the crown.

Poised at 5'8", she walks into Frisco's Corner Bakery dolled up in a cream-colored suit and long, straight hair. As she walks, her smile takes the lead and her red stilettos try to keep up. She orders a chicken salad sandwich on black olive bread.

"What do you know? They picked me. The local girl," she says.

Phillips entered the Miss Frisco pageant when a friend challenged her to do it. The pageant was held at Plano West High School.

"I was going to Collin County Community College in Plano, and I was working three jobs: I was working at Primrose School; I was a cover band singer; and I was a wedding singer, taking my beat-up 1990 Honda Accord around – it was just barely putting," she

laughs. "I was working so hard."

The work paid off. Phillips met Jan Mitchell, manager of the Miss Plano Frisco Scholarship Organization, who asked her, "Do you have a talent?" And Phillips, elated, said, "Well, I'm a music major at Collin County. I can sing!"

Speech class also paid off. At the time, Phillips was writing speeches on music education. "Putting Arts in the Picture: Reframing Education" would be her platform as Miss Frisco.

"I had this misconception that pageants were for rich girls, but let me tell you, I'm not rich," says Phillips. "I didn't have money to pay for all those expensive dresses. I borrowed clothes from my friends. I actually used a bathing suit that I had swam in!" Phillips laughs.

As a first-time competitor in the Miss Texas pageant, Phillips says she wasn't intimidated. "I knew you didn't have to come in first place to get a scholarship. Every girl who enters into the Miss Texas pageant comes away with a scholarship."

She came away with over \$13,000. "When I made that top five, I was on cloud nine because I was thinking, I am putting a huge dent into my college fund! When they told me I was the

winner, I was going to pass out. I said, 'The girl who was working three jobs has just paid for her education!'"

Now, Phillips speaks in schools all across the state. Her platform as Miss Texas is "Never Give Up." "I tell young people that no matter what you go through, never give up on your dreams ... and never give up on your education."

She's probably repeated those words a hundred times on her 12-month speaking tour, but you wouldn't have known it sitting in front of her. Phillips is deeply passionate about education because, well, she almost gave up on hers. Phillips dropped out of Howard University in Washington, D.C. for a recording contract.

Leaving Howard was a very difficult decision for me," she says. "I had an opportunity to go to Los Angeles for a recording deal. I didn't realize that the music industry was very much affected by 9/11, and 20 percent of the record industry was fired or laid off by major labels. So everything started to go downhill."

A deal with RCA fell through and a deal with Sony fell through. "I continued to push for about two-and-a-half years, I made over 15 demos, and I studied with

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one of the best voice teachers out there who's worked with LeAnn Rimes and all the American Idols.”

Speaking of “American Idol,” you may remember Phillips serenading to Simon Cowell on season three. She sang “Unchained Melody” and made it to Hollywood, but it, too, didn't work out.

“I didn't let it get me down. I came back to Plano and put myself through Collin County Community College, and in a year-and-a-half received over 80 credits.”

Then, Phillips, who has been singing since she was three years old, got accepted into the University of North Texas to pursue jazz studies. “I encourage young people not to drop out of school to try to *find* their dreams, but to find their dreams through their education,” she stresses.

“I didn't realize that even if I would have continued on with my education, 23 years old would not have been too old to go after my dream. I look at Christina Aguilera, Britney Spears, Shante, and Beyonce, and I see how old they are and how their careers are going.”



In more than one way, Phillips, who is originally from California, doesn't measure her standards against Hollywood's.

When discussing body image for example, she's not caught up in Hollywood's definition of beauty. “People are so obsessed with Hollywood thinking, Oh I wish my nose were smaller or I wish my lips were bigger. Girls who think there's something wrong with them need to realize that they don't need to change who they are to fit someone else's standard of beauty.”

So, being thin is more about being healthy. Said Phillips, “My trainer encourages me to eat six times a day – small meals – and I lift weights, and it keeps me really healthy.”

Everyone has an ideal body type, but we just need to learn to love our body,” she continues. “I was always kind of unhappy about my body because I don't have curves, but I learned to accept myself for who I am.



Miss Texas Shilah Phillips recently participated in the annual Children's Christmas Parade in Dallas.

I'm never going to have a Britney Spears or a Pamela Anderson or a Janet Jackson body. My sister, she was really blessed to have a great figure.”

Phillips sister, Summer, is a dancer. Her brother, Tracy, is a medic with the elite U.S. Navy SEAL teams. “My brother and sister are shining athletes,” said Phillips, the middle child. “I've always wanted to be in the spotlight my whole life. The fact that I am kind of a rising star is special.”

Phillips parents are from Plano. Her dad, Jonathan Nicol, is a civil engineer for Carter & Burgess and her mom, Janie Nicol, is an interior designer.

Growing up, her parents stressed that education was important but that it was her responsibility. Since Phillips has taken on that responsibility, she says she's become a better person. She has mentored young girls in the Lonestar Princess program, and she's visited nursing homes and sung to the elderly. “It became my responsibility to be a good citizen and to give back to the community,” Phillips says. “My life suddenly meant something.”

Her altruistic spirit is contagious, kind of like her smile. Surely, she's a role model for young girls everywhere.

“Let your daughter have a role model who is living up to the standards of educating themselves, fulfilling their dreams, and holding themselves accountable,” Phillips says. “Those are the kind of role models our children need.”

Young and old will cheer Phillips on as she competes in the Miss America pageant this month. For the talent part of the competition, Phillips will sing, “I Believe in You and Me.”

“The Miss America program has really helped me to believe in myself,” Phillips says. “And in others. People volunteer over 500,000 hours to the Miss America organization and that says something very special about the spirit of giving. We live in a country where dreams come true and anything is possible, if you believe in yourself and in others.”

The Miss America pageant will air live on CMT (Country Music Television) at 7 p.m. Monday, January 29. *Good luck Shilah!*

For more information on the Miss Texas organization, visit www.misstexas.org. For more information on the Miss Plano Frisco Scholarship Organization, visit www.mpfo.com.