



Submitted photos

Above, Harley Pakuris, 4, won the "Back the Blue" category at the recent Baby Miss USA pageant in Orlando, Florida. Below, Woonsocket native Milani Jones, 1, was runner up for "Baby Miss USA" but won "Baby Miss Gulf Coast" at the pageant.

Woonsocket families represent RI at national baby pageant

By STELLA LORENCE
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WOONSOCKET – Two local families won big at the national Baby Miss USA pageant in Orlando, Florida earlier this month.

Harley Pakuris, 4, daughter of Brandyn and Shawna Lee Pakuris, and Milani Jones, 1, daughter of Chelsea Barker and Tirrell Jones, both took home multiple sashes, trophies, crowns and medals after a weekend of competing.

"She loved it," Shawna Lee Pakuris said of her daughter. "It's in her blood for pageants."

Both Pakuris and Barker, long-time friends whose two children each are both close in age, used to compete in pageants themselves. For both moms, this was their first time as a pageant parent and their daughters' first time competing.

"We were really excited to put



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her in a big girl pageant," Barker said. "It was very exciting. I love to dress her up in her outfits and watch her enjoy herself."

Baby Miss USA is a "100% natural" pageant, so the young contestants don't wear make-up, hair extensions or false teeth. Barker said the judges don't necessarily want the kids to be too "trained" – they're allowed to walk

onstage and "be themselves."

The contest was founded by Sammie Savoie, who still serves as national director, and has four main themed attire competitions as well as judging on natural beauty, personality and smile, according to a press release. In 2021, Savoie added a "Project Back the Blue" contest in support of law enforcement as a response to the "Defund the Police" movements that spread in protest of the police killing George Floyd

in Minnesota the prior summer.

In addition to the themed attire, the contest encourages the contestants and their families to meet with local police departments and learn about community service. Pakuris and Harley visited the Woonsocket Police Station before heading to Orlando for the competition, bringing coffee and donuts to the officers on duty.

Pakuris said Harley loved the visit, and thanked Sgt. Jesse Nunnemacher

for his support of Harley's pageant campaign. After receiving a WPD badge and being "sworn in" by her grandmother, Harley offered to start working the night shift, according to a police report of the visit shared with Pakuris and The Call & Times.

Harley took home the "Project Back the Blue" competition title before winning it all and being crowned "Little Miss USA 2024." She also won eight gold medals and two bronze medals for other

categories throughout the weekend.

Milani took home the "Baby Miss Gulf Coast" and was runner-up for "Baby Miss USA," in addition to five gold medals and one each silver and bronze.

"I was really shocked," Barker said. "I felt like crying but I held it together. I'm really humbled that my daughter won."

Now, both Harley and Milani will move on to compete in Little Miss America and potentially at

the worldwide competition after that, for which they're already seeking sponsors. They were both initially selected from a pool of over 1,200 Rhode Island candidates via an open online photo contest, and Barker said she's proud that two Rhode Island contestants did so well and got to represent the state.

"I love Rhode Island," Barker said. "It's a really nice place."

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