

Sophomore Kristin Hsu looked to Rory Pan for inspiration when beginning her pageant journey in her freshman year. While both had Miss Atlanta Executive Director Russell Kirby as a Social Studies teacher, he also doubled as a mentor to the amateur pageant competitors. When first approached about Hsu's participation in pageants, her mother was reluctant, but after talking with Kirby and Rory's mother, Li Liu, she quickly saw that the typical stereotypes of beauty pageants were false.

"At first she didn't want me to do it, but she quickly learned that it was about more than beauty," Hsu said, referring to the opportunities and scholarships Pan was introduced to as a pageant competitor.

Hsu was glad to have her mother's support as she prepared for her first competition-Miss Georgia's Outstanding Teen.

Hsu was able to bypass the local stage with an appointment from Kirby, a move now banned from the organization. Even though she bypassed the local stage, Hsu still maintained the title of Miss Historic Buford's Outstanding Teen as she prepared for state level competition. While Hsu had the basic qualities of a pageant competitor, she needed to learn how to conduct herself with the same decorum as the seasoned competitors.

According to Kirby, most teen competitors perform a dance routine or a piece on their instrument to gain points in the Talent category. Hsu, already an experienced violin player, practiced her piece for months before competition registration. However, at registration, Hsu discovered that another competitor had selected her song, forcing her to select a different piece just two months before competition.

"She was very flexible with that, even though she had been practicing for months," Kirby said.

In addition to practicing her new song, Hsu had to improve performance in the other categories, including evening gown and interview. She hired two coaches-one to help her maintain confidence while walking in heels, and one to help her with the interview stage, Hsu's favorite portion.

"A lot of the questions that they ask are off your resume. They all just tie into you as a person. It's not something scary, it's just answering questions and having a conversation with the judges," Hsu said.

She likened the interview stage to simple conversations, something she enjoys, as it gives her the chance to show her vibrant personality through her various achievements.

Many of her achievements are geared towards her platform, which focuses on anti-bullying. Pageant competitors have to create a platform that improves the community

around them. While many organize minor events, Hsu has gone above and beyond, which is what catapulted her to the state stage.

Hsu has held fundraisers and plans to give talks at schools about the importance of kindness. She recently had Governor Nathan Deal sign a declaration that make October Georgia's official anti-bullying month.

Hsu's personal experience with bullies factor into her decision to choose this platform-not only does Hsu deal with gossip, but also with assumptions of shallowness due to being a pageant contestant.

"There are people in my life who mock me in a way, they support me, but they have a set mindset and talk behind your back," Hsu said.

Surprisingly, Hsu finds support from her competitors. While all the girls compete for a crown, Hsu finds that the friendships and bonds made at competition are the real prize. She feels as if she has made her closest friends by competing in the Miss Georgia's Outstanding Teen pageants. In addition to the girls themselves, Hsu also finds support from her mother.

"My mom helps me remain positive and confident in myself," Hsu said.

Her mother, Sonnie Hsu, has seen her daughter grow more confident and mature during her journey as a pageant girl. While at first she was reluctant to let Hsu compete, once she saw the skills Pan developed from being involved in pageants, she was eager to jump into her role as a pageant mom.

"I feel that it has made her more confident, empathetic young lady. Everything that came out of being in the pageant has been positive," Hsu said.

In the future, Kristin Hsu plans to return to Miss Georgia's Outstanding Teen, this time by competing in Miss Capital City on September 29.