

INSIDE THE MISS TEEN USA PAGEANT

THE REHEARSALS

Back in the ballroom, the girls are doing their final run-through of the day. Yesterday they each had a private three-minute interview with the pageant judges about education, interests and future ambitions. Today is for show practise, including three outfit changes. Each section is timed and there's no room for error, as they'll be scored on physical fitness, public speaking and poise. "You have to make sure you're polished inside and out," says Miss Beaumont Teen Chelsea Gilligan, 17. The devoutly

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Christian contestant reveals she took up pageanting while doing a 21-day religious fast, which involved giving up the food she loved. "During the fast, God showed me to do a pageant of all things," she says. "So I did." In the official pageant program Chelsea also cites "Jesus Christ" in the "love of my life" category. Cracks are already beginning to appear in the contestants' cheery facades. Greer's trying to fix a broken shoe buckle with a safety pin, and

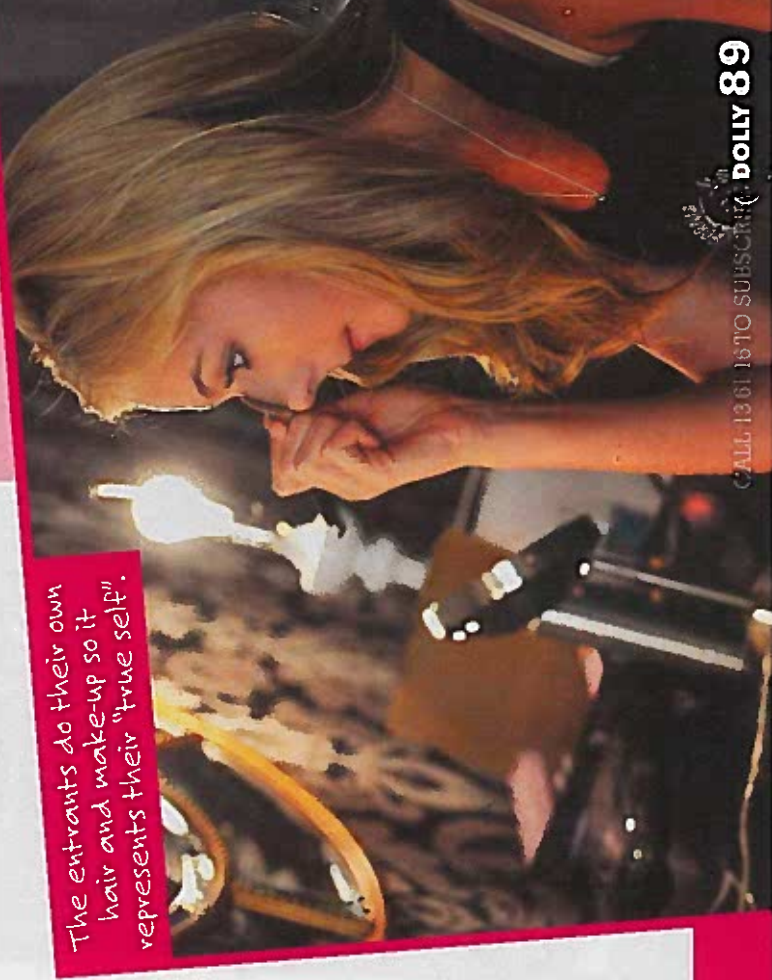
Backstabbing and bitching? Or a whole lot of hairspray and hot air? DOLLY goes undercover to suss out the OTT world of American beauty pageants.

hip smile and wave pose. "It's a long process," says 14-year-old Miss Rancho Jamul Teen, Alexis Lauren Swanson. "I started working out in the gym twice a week two months ago and cut out carbs." The week before competition, the girls pack in hair colouring, manicures, pedicures, eyebrow waxing and tanning. "Last year I had an allergic reaction to my spray tan and was itching for the first two days of the competition," Greer tells



us. Like potential beauty blow-outs aren't worrying enough, there's also the stress of deciding what to wear. With swimsuit and evening dress rounds, it's vital no one has the same outfit. Popular dress shops do one-offs and keep a record of who buys what so there's no chance of clashing. "Mine's from a shop in Malibu, I got a discount because I'm representing the town," Greer says. With most gowns costing around \$500, getting pageant-prettily doesn't come cheap. Then there's the \$1500-plus entry fee to cover things like sashes and chaperone fees.

The entrants do their own hair and make-up so it represents their "true self."



I t's 8am on Sunday morning. Forty-four girls fill the Grand Ballroom of the glitzy Riviera Hotel and Spa in Palm Springs, where they're rehearsing for tonight's Miss California Teen USA pageant. Their get-ups are an unusual mix of chilled and crazy competitive: sweatpants or jeans paired with "competition heels", sashes (which must be worn at all times) and a full face of make-up.

NEXT STOP, STARDOM!

Some girls have travelled as far as 800km (further than the distance between Adelaide and Melbourne) to compete in the state final. For many girls, pageanting is seen as a springboard to bigger things, with famous former beauty queens like Halle Berry and Eva Longoria inspiring them to stick with it. Almost every girl has aspirations to be a famous singer, actor or dancer. "A month before the competition I start chanting, 'I am Miss California Teen USA' to myself every day," says second-time entrant Miss Malibu Teen, Greer Grammer, 16. "It builds up my confidence and positivity so I'm not nervous when I'm out on stage. If I believe it about myself, the judges will see it, too."

TRAINING DAYS

On Friday night, the girls are dropped off with the chaperones who look after them over the weekend. They won't see their parents until after the competition final on Sunday. "It's probably less stressful for her to be with the other girls," laughs Jane Bambrick, the mother of 15-year-old Kelly. "I get more nervous than she does." The entrants seem relaxed but, in reality, their preparation began long before this weekend! Pageant girls attended four-hour "pageant classes" every week for the past two months, where they were tutored in public speaking, a group dance routine and the classic "hand-on-

Kelly has five blisters where her heels are rubbing. Meanwhile, Miss Redondo Beach has snuck away to the toilets and is crying into her mobile. It turns out she missed the 11pm curfew last night and is being told off for "disrespecting the pageant". Her stern treatment comes as no surprise, as entrants are required to follow an extremely strict code of conduct. Each girl must be 100 per cent wholesome and clean-cut, and behave in a way that does her town proud. The constant appearances at openings and charity events can be a serious drag on their social lives. "Sometimes I can't even hang out with my friends because I have a pageant responsibility," Alexis reveals.

THE FINAL COUNTDOWN

Backstage, makeshift dressing rooms have been set up in the hotel's conference centre. With three hours to go before the final, hair straighteners and curlers stick out of every socket and the smell of hairspray is thick. There aren't enough mirrors for each girl, so entrants roam the corridors in search of somewhere to apply a fresh coat of make-up. Although they're supposed to do their own hair and make-up, so it represents "them",

professionals are on hand to give last minute touch-ups. The most popular request is a second set of false eyelashes to make their eyes really "pop" or some sticky tape to keep their sash in place, but one girl is getting a tattoo above her bikini line covered up. The girls change into their opening outfit, a pink Miss California Teen top and white shorts. Despite everyone insisting the atmosphere is friendly, the rivalry is obvious. One entrant beams warmly at a fellow competitor before pulling a nasty "make me



Despite everyone insisting the atmosphere is friendly, the rivalry is obvious. One entrant beams warmly at a fellow competitor before pulling a nasty "make me puke" face ...

puke" face when she's out of eyesight. Most girls separate into cliques or listen to their iPods alone. "I'm getting into the zone," says Chelsea, who has Rihanna cranking. Despite the greasy looks flying around the room, most competitors say their friends outside the pageant world are their harshest critics. "Some of my friends are like 'Oh my God, why would you ever compete in a beauty pageant? They're so superficial!'" Greer says. "You don't understand unless you've been in one. I've gained so much confidence and really learned who I am"

they won't be judged. The girls reappear in their bikinis and each of the top 15 sashays around the stage before waiting for the top 10 to be called. The girls rush backstage again to get their dresses on and then five more are cut. The top five then face a new challenge – they must answer a question on stage. No one actually says they wish for world peace more than anything, but the answers seem rehearsed and vague. Chelsea says she'd represent the contest "in a great way" if she wins, but doesn't say how exactly. Her family cheer loudly anyway.

AND THE WINNER IS ...

Greer places in the top 10 while Alexis comes second runner-up. Her mum, Sheryl Swannstrom, a former pageant queen herself, is very pleased. "I used to do pageants when I was younger but these days I get to play Barbie with my daughter instead," she says. Chelsea is crowned the winner by reigning Miss California Teen Taylor Atkins. Her proud parents Roger and Lynn Neal rush onto the stage to hug their daughter. "It hasn't set in yet that I'm Miss California Teen," she says through tears. "I'm going to sleep with my tiara on!" Her father assumes the role of pushy stage parent, correcting Chelsea's posture as she poses in her tiara. "He's always doing that," Chelsea giggles, before her father leads her away to do more interviews. It's all in a day's work for a pageant girl and her parents.

The girls practise their group dance routine in one of the few mirrors not being used for makeovers.

