

Rose Chung

Founder

Miss Asian Global Pageant

Interviewed by William Zhang

Please share a little about yourself. What inspired you to found the Miss Asian Global Pageant? What keeps you motivated to continue expanding your support in empowering young women?

My name is Rose Chung. I'm a native of San Francisco, Chinatown. I'm 68 years old and born and raised here. My main things that I do right now are just to keep good health, support the Asian community and live a happy life. I'm a happiness practitioner. How did I start the Miss Asian Global Pageant? Coming from a sheltered childhood, my childhood dream was to participate in the Chinatown pageant. At age 22, I gathered up the courage and knew that was what I wanted to do, regardless of what the results were. I knew it was a growth opportunity. I ran in it, and I won. It totally changed my life. Prior to that, I had no experience, no social skills, just really nothing. I was just a simple girl from Chinatown, from an immigrant mother who was a widow raising 5 girls. So, of course, we had no money for anything. She was a seamstress. It was a typical Chinatown upbringing. So becoming Miss Chinatown USA gave me the opportunity to know more people. People asked me to participate in activities. I became more confident. I came to realize that I love doing community service and just helping out. I really enjoyed that. I helped out with the Rose Bowl Pageant and became the president, coordinating activities in 1985. The opportunity to do a Miss Asian California pageant at this Asian festival in San Jose came up. So I coordinated it, and loved doing it. The festival was just for one year, but the Miss Asian California pageant evolved to become Miss Asian America, and then Miss Asian Global pageant. We celebrated our 40th anniversary last year. And this is the 1st year that I am totally stepping back, letting the new generation of leaders take over. When I coordinated the Miss Asian California pageant, I was just learning along the way how to do it. It was simple and it's just grown and grown and refined. What I love about it is the friends that I made. It's just really exciting. It's just like planning a wedding except I have 20 brides. I have parents. There's drama. There are money issues and just all these challenges and everything. But then at the end it's over 100 people getting so excited to find out what the final result is. It gets your adrenaline running year round. We get asked to do community service activities. The court members make new friends, they develop confidence as I did. I just find that to be rewarding. I've just been so blessed and fortunate to be able to coordinate that pageant, having the support of people who sponsor and everything like that. Over the 40 years it has grown. I'm just glad that I left that legacy.

Do you know another language? If so, how did you learn it? Do you need to use your language skills to support your work?

My mother did not speak English. She spoke Sze Yup (a Chinese dialect), she's from Hoi Ping. I spoke Sze Yup but she sent me to Chinese school, so I have 4 years of Chinese education. That's the Sam Yup (another Chinese dialect), I think it's more refined. When I was young, we went to see movies in Chinatown, and that helped improve my Cantonese. It really helped me when I became Miss Chinatown. People say that I've improved a lot since then. I got involved with the family association, so I had more connections in Chinatown. People spoke to me in Chinese so I got to practice it more. I've taken on leadership roles in my family association, so I get to practice there. Living in Chinatown, I look at the Chinese store signs and I practice my bit of Cantonese there. It's really helped me. I use it, and I'm really proud that I've improved.

What makes the Miss Asian Global Pageant unique? How is it different from other beauty pageants?

The Miss Asian Global Pageant is unique and different because we have participants from different Asian cultures, and it's really beautiful to be able to connect with one another and share their pride in their culture. The production is a lot more interesting too, looking at the beautiful costumes that they have. How is it different? Well, it has evolved. When I did the pageant in 1981, all you needed to participate in a pageant was courage. That's all I did. I just focused on walking with poise. That's just being able to walk out there with poise and just hope that I don't bomb the Q&A question. When we were young, people didn't emphasize public speaking, there weren't any opportunities to speak in public. It wasn't that difficult. It was more important at that time that you walk with poise and find a talent. I was taught a dance in several weeks. It was just about showing up with courage. Now, in this day in age, women are so accomplished already. You have millionaires who are teenagers starting their own companies. They have had so many more opportunities. So their expectations are a lot higher. It isn't just walking out with the opportunity to be out on stage, having that little bit of experience, answering the Q&A and performing with a small talent. These women today come, some are doctors, some are lawyers, so the expectations are higher. The young ones are expecting some kind of guidance in college applications to Ivy League schools. We do have a mentorship program to meet their expectations and to get them connected with their culture and to be involved in community activities. It is also to let the high aspiring women connect with their peers who also have high aspirations. I would say, most pageants help build connections, and people don't know that the women there are really intelligent. Our pageant, I believe, is really helping women reach their highest goal.

Beside cultural understanding and representations, do the delegates speak with respective languages? If so, how has their language skills supported their careers?

Each year is a different class. We are Miss Asian Global, and we accept delegates from all over the world. I just recall an Indian delegate who went back to India and became a talk show host. Each person joined the pageants for different reasons. Each person is different, some of them go back to their country. I'm just thinking about Stephanie Kim. She was our queen about 5 years ago, and she's actually running for Miss California USA this time. She went back and lived in Korea. Her sister is a K-pop singer. I think that for her, she's really Westernized, but she went back to Korea. I think that was really helpful for her.

How many delegates has the Miss Asian Global Pageant served? What kind of support does the organization offer (leadership training, public speaking skills)?

We have a mentorship program. Let me tell you about Dr. Francis Kong. He was a pediatrician. He always tells a story that his parents wanted him to be a doctor. But after he finished medical school, he wasn't a doctor for too long, but what he really loves is computer gaming and he goes to Comic-Con every year. It's also his passion to mentor young people. That was a game changer in our Miss Asian Global Pageant. He mentors the young woman who comes through us, and always asks, what do you want to do? The thing about his story that he always tells is when he was a medical student, he got in a plane crash. When he survived that plane crash, I think it just went down and everyone survived. At that moment when they're telling you to brace yourself, you don't know if the plane's going to explode or anything. That was a turning point for him that he realized that he didn't want to be a doctor. He wanted to do what he wanted to do. So he approaches his mentorship with the young women and young men as well to ask them, what do they really want to do. They focus on that, rather than what the parents wanted them to do. He tries to find out what your passion is and guide you in that direction. For our pageant, we call it the Miss Asian Global family. We are also very supportive. If they (the delegates) open a business, we want to go support them. We know that if they participate in our pageant, it will impact their life and help them to experience personal growth. The average is 23 to 24 contestants every year, about 37 years, because there were a couple years that we didn't do the pageant.

Is there anything else that you would like to highlight?

I'm also on the board of the Portsmouth Square Garage. I live near Chinatown, so I try to go there as often as possible to promote it. I feel passionate about Chinatown. The Portsmouth Square Garage story is that in the late 1950s, these businessmen who are around 40 years old are led by Paul Louie. He was only 35 years old. They fought to build a garage in Chinatown, which later on became a cash cow up until recently when Lyft and Uber took over your business. But it was a big

cash cow. People used to have to wait 45 minutes in line to get into the garage. Can you imagine we didn't have a garage? Chinatown would not have been thriving the way it was when it was thriving before that earthquake in '89. These businessmen fought to build the garage, and I want to carry their legacy. If you ever go into Portsmouth Square Garage, it's a lot friendlier. There is a beautiful mirror of the Chinatown gate and a little art gallery. In recent times, it was for children's art contests, photographs of Chinatown, lion dancing, or a cartoon person who had his cartoon work up there. It's open to the public to apply to be in that art gallery. I feel that the garage is the portal to Chinatown. When people come in, they get a really good impression. Prior to this, the sign that says Portsmouth Square Garage, had a big old hole in it, like a baseball went through it. It just was unfriendly. It was just asphalt. I hope that now when people come to Chinatown, when they see that space, they know that there's a community here in Chinatown. That's one of the things that I feel like I'm practicing my skills in promoting Chinatown, being a positive influence. I'm also with the APA Family Support Services, another nonprofit that helps families become self-sufficient. We have food giveaways, but the foods are culturally appropriate. So we don't have those vegetables that you don't know what to do with. I'm just still carrying on the banner of being Miss Chinatown. Being that ambassador in some way and just volunteering because it brings me great joy. It's not work at all.