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Beauty queens, advocates and much more

Newport Beach Film Festival will have the world premiere of 'Defining Beauty: Ms. Wheelchair America.'

April 23, 2011 | By Sarah Peters, sarah.peters@latimes.com



Cast members Alyson Roth, Michelle Colvard and Erika...

Editor's note: This corrects the year the women went through the pageant and Alyson Roth's title.

These contestants are no ordinary beauty queens. They jump out of airplanes, drive race cars, enter surf competitions and ride in bicycle races.

They have more courage than most, never mind that they take on the world from the seat of a wheelchair.

"A lot of people see the chair and define women by that chair and not their personality," said Alexis Ostrander, director and co-producer of a documentary on Ms. Wheelchair America that premieres at the Newport

Beach Film Festival. "What we are trying to do with this film is to get people to see the women, not just the chair."

"Defining Beauty: Ms. Wheelchair America" world premieres at 3:45 p.m. May 1, at the Starlight Triangle Square Cinemas in Costa Mesa.

Ostrander, along with co-producers Meagan Keane, Molly Kasch and executive producer Manuela Ikenze, followed the lives of seven women with varying disabilities as they go through the pageant process for the 2010 Ms. Wheelchair America.

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"I definitely feel like my ideas and stigmas that I didn't even realize I had just really fall away," Keane said. "That's why it's so important not just for people with family members with disabilities, but for the general public to see this film. It really will change your mind about what you think about people in wheelchairs."

Not only are stigmas broken when examining the often barrier-defying actions of the beauty contestants, the film's producers found to be courageous as well.

When filming 2009 Ms. Michigan Amber Marcy prepare for her skydiving jump, Ostrander swore she would never jump out of a plane. But she followed Marcy out that day. They've since been skydiving twice together.

It's this kind of passionate influence that makes the candidates for Ms. Wheelchair America and the spokeswoman for 52 million disabled Americans, Ostrander said.

"I think with able-bodied beauty pageants, where the participants are based and voted on their beauty, talents and education, this pageant differs because it's an advocacy pageant," said Mission Viejo resident Alyson Roth, Ms. Wheelchair California 2009.

Participants in Ms. Wheelchair America speak on behalf of disabled Americans at community centers, local and national organizations, educational institutions or wherever else they are needed to "level the playing field," she said.

"It was important to me to be an advocate for those who couldn't speak or are not speaking," Roth said. "Just because you have a disability, life doesn't stop."

The film was accepted to the 2011 Staten Island Film Festival, which runs in June. After the festival circuit, the film and its message of "defining beauty" will be taken on the road to be screened at schools nationwide.

"There is such a raw beauty about them," Ostrander said of the pageant participants. "They show their outer beauty and their inner beauty. They're just so confident about themselves."

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