

Soldier and childhood pageant aspirant finally gets her shot at a title

BY SIERRA STARKS, ARMY SPOUSE



Eva Salcedo has vivid childhood memories of sitting in front of the television with her grandmother in Puerto Rico, watching women from her home island compete in world-renowned beauty pageants.

"In Puerto Rico, pageants are like a sport," explained Salcedo. "It's super, super big at home."

Growing up, Salcedo had dreams of competing for a pageant title, but there was one obstacle: she was 5'3" tall. While the first-ever Miss America winner in 1921 stood at 5'1", modern pageants came to emphasize a specific ideal of beauty, typically favoring tall and slender contestants.

Putting that dream aside, Salcedo embraced another ambition. Inspired by family members who served in various branches of the Armed Forces, she enlisted in the U.S. Army in 2003. This decision expanded her horizons far beyond the island of Puerto Rico and resulted in postings around the world. Salcedo eventually settled in Hawaii, where she now serves as a reservist.

In 2020, during an overseas deployment, her beauty pageant dream resurfaced.

"When you go through that experience [of deployment], there's something in the back of your head reminding you of what you always wanted to do when you come back," said Salcedo. "I thought, you know what? No time like the present. Let's do it."

Fortunately, the standards of beauty pageants are evolving to reflect the reality that beauty is diverse and inclusive. Pageants are now embracing women of all heights, body types, ages, and stages of life. This year, Salcedo, 44, competed in the Mrs. Petite USA pageant, held from July 31 to Aug. 3 in Chicago, Illinois. She proudly represents Utah, a state where she served in the Army for several months.

The wife and mother of two planned to show the judges that her smaller stature is a strength, not a hindrance.

"Being a soldier in the Army, even though I'm only 5'3", I am required to do everything else that everybody does," she said. "And that's a message that I want to convey when I go to the pageant: You can be a model. You can be a soldier. You can be whatever you want to be."



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In addition to being a soldier and pageant contestant, Salcedo also identifies as a survivor. When asked by the Petite USA organization which cause she would champion as a pageant contestant, she chose domestic violence awareness and prevention, drawing from her own experience with intimate partner violence as a teenager.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines intimate partner violence as behavior by an intimate partner or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 47% of women in the United States have experienced contact sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner at some point in their lives.

In a recent blog post, Salcedo detailed the emotional and physical

abuse she endured from her first boyfriend in Puerto Rico. She hopes her story will reach victims to help them feel less alone and encourage them to find resources to escape their situation. Many abusers use isolation as a weapon to control their partners, according to WHO.

Even after leaving the abusive relationship, Salcedo says her ex-boyfriend continued to stalk and harass her. Eventually, she realized she needed a fresh start, which led her to the Army.

"I just didn't feel safe anymore at home," Salcedo recalled. "And I saw the military as a way to open new opportunities and leave home knowing that I already had a job and could make a difference." ■

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