

History of Miss Australia

Striving to achieve...

Doing our best...

This is what Australians take pride in when they see outstanding people represent their country. Whatever the event, it serves as a focal point in the tapestry of time, whereas the pride which we feel is the fibre that creates the fabric of the Australian persona. One event that became a traditional part of this Australian picture was the Miss Australia Quest / Awards. But how many Australians know when and where it began and what it achieved?

The first Australian beauty contest in 1908 was sparked off by an American Newspaper claim that Miss Margaret Frey, winner of one of the first US beauty contests, must be "the most beautiful woman in the world".

Australians refused to concede this and set about finding a girl to answer such a challenge on behalf of local womanhood. The result was Miss Alice Buckridge who wore boots, scorned make-up and weighed 70 kilos.

Australia's second beauty contest was staged in 1911 at the Sydney Stadium, but the winner Miss Millicent Mahy, who never got around to collecting her prize - a Venus statue valued at £100.

Beauty contests were few and far between in those days and the next national competition did not take place until 1928 when Miss Beryl Mills became Miss Australia.

It was the first to be officially named the Miss Australia Contest.

Many organisations have intermittently promoted a Miss Australia Quest. Some reasonably successful fundraising ventures under the Miss Australia Quest banner were conducted, particularly during and immediately following the Second World War.

The Miss Australia Quest again captured the public interest in 1926, when it was introduced by Joynton Smith, owner of the Daily Guardian and Smith's Weekly as a means of boosting newspaper circulation. In those early times, selection started primarily as a beauty contest and contestants were chosen from photographs. The final judging was held in Sydney.

The contest lapsed until 1953, when it was revived by Bernard J. Dowd, Managing Director of Dowd Associates, marketers in Australia of the American Hickory garments, to promote their products. Basically, the selections involved only newspaper advertisements seeking photographs of young girls from which a panel of judges, appointed by Hickory in each state, would privately select a winner. Then each state winner would then travel to Melbourne where a judging panel, again appointed by Hickory, selected Miss Australia.

In 1954, during a lunchtime conversation, Mr Colin Clay, the Queensland Spastic Welfare League Executive Director, asked Mr G. Moore, the Queensland Director of Hickory, if the Quest could be used as a means of fundraising for 'spastic children' (children with cerebral palsy). This was prompted by the tremendous public interest generated by the judging of Miss Queensland. This conversation took place the day before the proposed selection of Miss Queensland. Everyone wholeheartedly gave their co-operation and the first £200 was raised through the Miss Australia Quest. Thus, instead of being used solely as a commercial promotion, the Miss Australia Quest was turned into a worthy benefit to the community.

Miss Jill Jackson was chosen as Miss Queensland and represented the state at the national judging in Melbourne the following week. Miss Shirley Bliss from New South Wales became Miss Australia 1954.

Subsequently Mr Clay devised and submitted a plan to Mr Dowd which would allow fundraising by entrants within the Miss Australia Quest structure. In the following year, the plan was fully discussed by Mr Dowd and Mr Kenneth Mitchell, Chairman of the Queensland Spastic Children's Appeal Committee. Mr Dowd was particularly keen that whatever was organised should be on a national basis with all Spastic Centres in Australia participating. A telephone hook-up around Australia resulted in the co-operation of The Spastic Centres in each state and the Quest launched in a national format.

The Quest, while it was sponsored by Mr Dowd and Hickory, it was conducted in each state by The Spastic Centres and the funds those centres raised provided care and welfare for children with cerebral palsy in that state. The co-operation of that fundraising effort was under the auspices of the Australian Cerebral Palsy Association – the Federation of Australian Spastic Centres. In 1963, Mr Dowd gave to the Australian Cerebral Palsy Association the full rights of ownership of the Miss Australia Quest.

In each state, the Australian Cerebral Palsy Association owned the Miss Australia Quest as a business enterprise and has the various titles – Miss Queensland, Miss New South Wales, etc. – registered in its name. Also registered were the Charity Queens/Fundraisers titles associated with each Region and State.

One thousand women participated annually in the Quest throughout the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and the 1980s.

In 1992, the Miss Australia Quest was changed to the Miss Australia Awards to reflect more closely the attitudes, achievements and aspirations of young Australian womanhood and attracted renewed appreciation for their skills, talents and contribution to community life. The trappings traditionally associated with beauty contests such as the sceptre, sashes and crowns were relegated to the archives in 1991 – Helena Wayth being the first Miss Australia to be awarded a title and not crowned.

The Australian Cerebral Palsy Association recognised that a major barrier to the rights of people with disabilities lies in community attitudes. Every effort was made to create public awareness, acceptance and understanding of people with cerebral

palsy as contributing members of the community. Like each and every Miss Australia entrant, people with disabilities are people with hopes, dreams and aspirations. The Quest did not represent an individual image, but rather it symbolized a combined concept of participation, striving, helping and achievement. This is what each entrant did when she entered Miss Australia.

In October 1998, the Miss Australia Company announced that in February 2000 it would cease to operate this great Australia icon. There were magic moments, even episodes that created national controversy. This was the longest running quest in Australia, and can take pride in knowing that the Miss Australia Quest/Awards have forged a place for itself in the living history of Australia.

In 2000, the final Miss Australia, Miss Sheree Primmer, was selected and announced for the Australian Cerebral Palsy Association.

Many critics gave the Quest a lifetime of no more than two years, but their predictions were proven incorrect. Miss Australia was successfully conducted for 45 years as a major fundraising medium for The Spastic Centres of Australia. Over its duration entrants, their families, committees, sponsors and the general public of Australia raised in excess of \$87 million.

“In the field of human endeavour
there is no activity more worthy than
that which is devoted to the care of
others.”

(Unknown)

Please note:

From 2001, Australia has been represented in international contests by Miss Universe Australia. This title has sometimes been erroneously labeled Miss Australia by the media – and this has caused some confusion.

1. “Miss Australia Quest – Brief History”, author The Spastic Centre.
2. “Would Miss Australia Please Come Forward”, author The Spastic Centre, c1987.