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American Woman

Since winning the Miss America crown in January, VCU student Caressa Cameron has traveled some 100,000 miles, watched the Super Bowl from Rush Limbaugh's luxury box, visited wounded U.S. soldiers in Germany and shaken hands with President Barack Obama. And that was just the first five months.

BY JOAN TUPPONCE
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The young patient at Children's National Medical Center is growing increasingly irritated at the woman across the table. The glittering crown that the 22-year-old VCU student just handed to her tour manager doesn't impress this elementary schooler in the least. He doesn't care that Caressa Cameron is Miss America.



Cameron at RIR in April for the Crown Royal Heath Calhoun 400. She sang "God Bless America" before the race. Intro: Casey Templeton photo; Above: Ash Daniel photo

All that matters is that they are playing Gone Fishing — and he is losing.

As Cameron starts to reel in yet another catch, he grabs the game and starts plucking fish out of the "water" with his hands. Cameron winces for a second and then tries to explain how to maneuver the miniature fishing rod. "Just go play by yourself!" the boy blurts back. Cameron, unruffled by the tantrum, smiles and begins to stack the fish she catches into the boy's pile. The gesture catches him off guard but serves to calm him down.

Cameron's appearance at the Children's National Medical Center in Washington, part of her work with Children's Miracle Network, is just one event in a busy schedule that will keep her traveling some 20,000 miles each month during her reign as Miss America.

Moments after winning the pageant on Jan. 30, Cameron was whisked to a back room with her family before attending to the media. "From that point on, we were shadows," her father, Jerome, says, alluding to the fact that his daughter would be on the move constantly for the next year, missing family events such as birthdays while appearing at innumerable public events, meeting wounded warriors overseas and at home, and promoting her personal platform of "Real Talk: AIDS in America."

Since that fateful night, Cameron has been living out of two suitcases and a carry-on. She's in a different location every 18 to 36 hours. "Your life changes immediately," she says. "The next day you are on a plane to New York for media and off on a year where you will live from hotel to hotel."

The Miss America pageant dates back to 1921, when a group of businessmen in Atlantic City, N.J., decided that a bathing-suit contest would be a surefire way to lure visitors to the city for the Labor Day weekend. The swimsuit competition has remained, but the pageant's focus shifted in

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1945, when it became a scholarship program for women. “People don’t understand what our mission is,” says Art McMaster, president and CEO of the Miss America Organization. “They are not aware of the amount of scholarship money we raise every year.”

Last year alone, the nonprofit Miss America Organization awarded more than \$45 million in scholarship assistance. (Cameron has used scholarship money earned through pageants to pay for college.)

Her pageant win also provides Cameron, who’s pursuing a bachelor’s degree in broadcast communications at VCU, a solid platform from which to launch a career: Her goal is to become a national television broadcaster, following in the footsteps of past Miss Americas such as WRIC alum Gretchen Carlson, who now co-hosts Fox News’ morning show *Fox and Friends*.

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