

Pageants are not child's play



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After four years of competing in beauty pageants, 5-year-old Gabrielle Citrino decided to call it quits. She is now embarking on a modeling career, according to her mother, Ann Diantonio.

Some girls have \$1,000 gowns and their own makeup artists

By JULIA PRODIS
Associated Press

YONKERS, N.Y. — As her mother tucked her into bed one night, Gabrielle Citrino laid it on the line: "I don't want to do it anymore."

For nearly five years, she's been traveling from state to state dolled up in rhinestones, feather boas and lipstick. She's been tap dancing, singing "Bye Bye Baby" and turning on the charm for countless judges. Finally, just shy of her sixth birthday, she's burned out.

"Pageants are hard and you try to remember all those steps," says Gabrielle, who has been on the beauty pageant circuit since she was 11 months old. "Sometimes they give me crowns that are hard to balance."

"It's her decision," says her mother, Ann Diantonio. "She's 5. She knows what she wants to do."

Murder has suddenly thrust the world of children's beauty pageants into the spotlight. Since 6-

year-old JonBenet Ramsey was found strangled in her Boulder, Colo., home last month, national magazines and TV shows have run photographs and videotapes of the dyed-blond woman-child vamping across stages in showgirl costumes and heavy makeup.

There are thousands of children like JonBenet. Charles Dunn, publisher of Pageantry magazine, estimates that, every year, beauty pageants show off 100,000 children under the age of 12.

It's a subculture of bleached hair, blue contact lenses and false eyelashes. Little girls sashay in sequined gowns and swimsuits, sometimes adding a touch of striptease by removing wrap-around skirts.

Parents pay entry fees of up to \$500 and buy \$1,000 gowns so their girls can compete for 10-inch crowns, 6-foot trophies and \$10,000 savings bonds. Some of

JonBenet update



JonBenet

BOULDER, Colo. (AP) — A photo lab employee and a former sheriff's deputy were arrested yesterday on charges of leaking the JonBenet Ramsey crime-scene photos that were published in a supermarket tabloid.

Lawrence Shawn Smith, a processor with Photo Craft Laboratories, and former deputy Brett Allen Sawyer sold the photos to The Globe for \$5,500, Boulder County Sheriff George Epp said. The photo lab routinely handled coroner's office photos.

Smith, 36, was charged with theft, tampering with physical evidence, obstructing government operations and false reporting. Sawyer, 38, who was a Boulder County deputy in 1980-81 and has since been a private investigator, was charged with obstructing government operations.

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the children travel with an entourage of makeup artists, hairdressers and talent coaches.

It pays to start young. Jo-Ann Guerin, director of All Star Kids U.S.A. Pageants, once got two entry forms from a woman with only one child. When Guerin asked why, the woman explained she was pregnant.

Babies too young to walk are paraded down pageant runways, their mothers holding the confused children out in front of them.

Pageant life isn't for everyone, industry organizers acknowledge. But for youngsters and parents who can handle wins and losses with aplomb, pageantry can foster poise and self-confidence, they say.

"I've never said that this is the greatest thing in the world for your child," says Guerin, who runs All Star Kids from her home in Yonkers. "Are there mothers that are nuts? Absolutely. But there are hard-working people who are devoted and want their kids to enjoy it."

Others are more critical.

If parents keep pageantry from consuming a child's life, it can be a positive experience, says William Pinsof, a clinical psychologist and president of the Family Institute at Northwestern University.

However, he says, "being a little Barbie doll says your body has to be a certain way and your hair has to be a certain way. In girls particularly, this can unleash a whole complex of destructive self-experiences that can lead to eating disorders and all kinds of body distortions in terms of body image."

For many parents, pageantry starts when they see an ad for a local pageant. Usually, all it costs is a \$20 entry fee and the price of a party dress. But when the winners move up to

state and national pageants, the costs escalate.

"You can go \$10,000," says Noreen Williams, the mother of a beauty contestant in Yulan, N.Y. "Some mothers get loans out for the pageants. Those are the ones that get angry at their girls when they lose."

Guerin got started with beauty pageants when her daughter, Genevieve, won a few pageants in New York as a pre-teen several years ago. With Genevieve's godmother, they set out for a huge pageant in Dallas. They coordinated their outfits for each day of the weeklong competition.

"If she was in pink, we were in pink. Of course, I thought I was bringing home a national winner," Guerin says. "We weren't in the lobby for 10

seconds when we thought, 'What are we doing here?' The Southern girls had it all — the coaches, the makeup artists, the clothes. My daughter did not win anything at that pageant."

Some mothers lie about their daughters' ages so they can appear more poised and mature compared to younger girls, Guerin says. For her pageant, she now requires birth certificates with entry forms.

Sometimes, mothers accuse each other of trying to buy influence by spending upward of \$250 a page for advertising in pageant directories.

"Let's face it, they'll cut your throat in a minute," says Williams.

But for the most part, she says, it's healthy competition. Her 16-year-old daughter, Dorothy, has been taking part in pageants for 12 years. She gets good grades and has a fledgling career as a model.

One day, she hopes to win a place in the Miss America Pageant.

"It's a little girl dream," Dorothy says. "Dreams have to start somewhere."

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Jo-Ann Guerin, director of All Star Kids U.S.A. Pageants, says some mothers lie about their daughters' ages so they can appear more poised compared with younger girls, so she requires birth certificates with all entry forms.