

80
YEARS

Enjoy! If you want
the rest, let me know -
there're 2 to a page,
so what? 20-25
pages, I guess.

Love ya, Maulim

So what happens *after* you hang
up your crown? We asked 61
Miss Americas to smile for the
camera (and spill the beans)

AMERICAN BEAUTIES

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERICA BERGER/CORBIS OUTLINE



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Once crowned, "you are always a Miss America," says 1933's winner, Marian Bergeron (right, with the reigning Miss America, Heather French).

80 YEARS

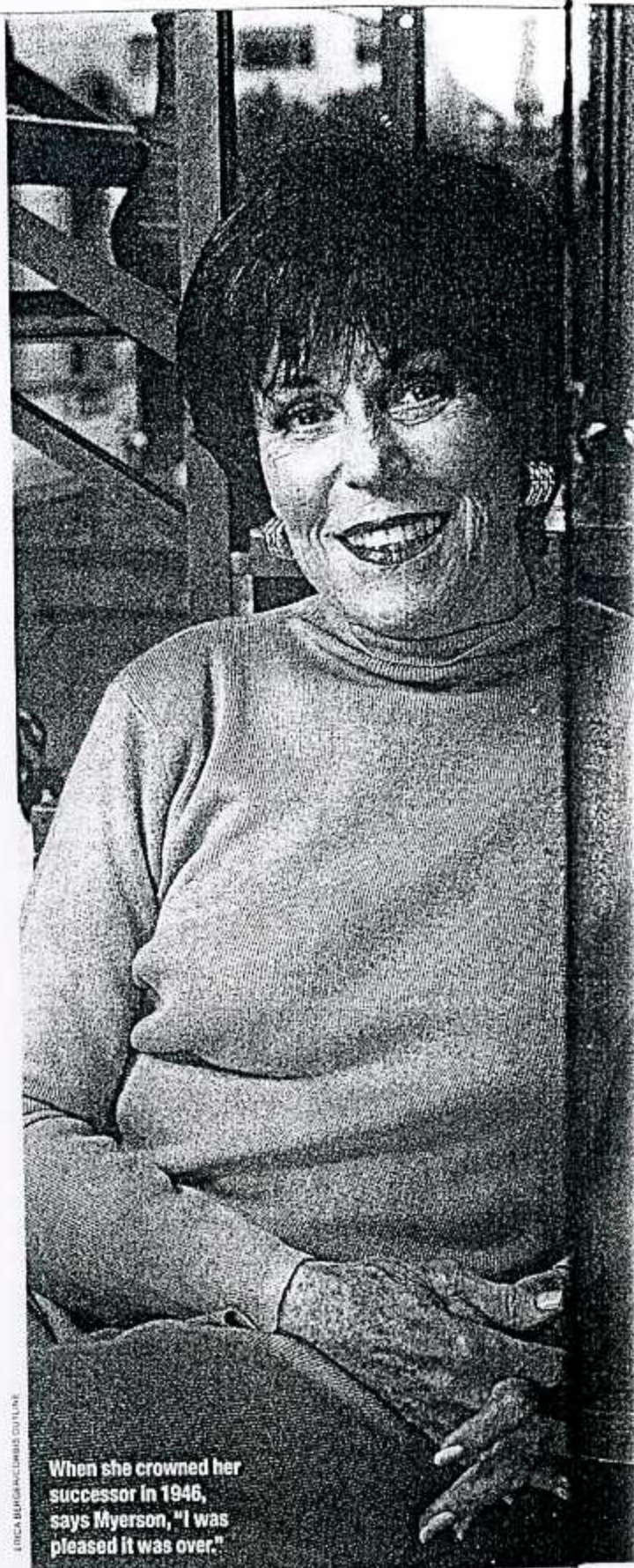
For Miss America, fame comes in a flash. One minute you're nearly anonymous; a second later, you're wearing a tiara, waving like Queen Elizabeth and dabbing at your mascara right there on national TV to the strains of "There She Is." The next morning you're in every newspaper; then off on a yearlong whirlwind tour and then . . . well, what, exactly?

To find out, PEOPLE sought out all 61 surviving Miss Americas, from Marian Bergeron (1933) to Heather French (2000). How do they feel about it all? What did they learn? Where do they keep that tiara? How have they changed 10, 20, 30, even 67 years after winning the title?

Most of the winners look back with pride; a couple, frankly, are bitter; others simply bemused. The day after she was crowned, says Marian McKnight (1957), "I was asked when I wanted to go home. I said Christmas week, and they said fine. And that was the only time I got to go home for a year," she recalls. "I didn't know they booked Miss America every day except Sunday!"

While some never got used to being in the public eye, others went on to make it their livelihood. On this page, we start with seven Miss Americas who, after their reigns, stayed in the national spotlight. Then we look at 54 others—musicians, motivational speakers, a gym teacher, a lawyer, single moms and divorcees, happily marrieds and grandmothers—who seldom make headlines. Whatever else life brought, they all belong, once and forever, to a unique sorority.

On Oct. 14, most of them, like an expected 15 million Americans, will watch as a new initiate joins the club. "We keep track and say, 'It *can't* be true!' like everybody else," says Rebecca King (1974), who tunes in with pals and her daughters Diana, now 12, and Emily, 15. "You *have* to watch," she says. "It's fun."



When she crowned her successor in 1946, says Myerson, "I was pleased it was over."

BESS MYERSON



1945

The night she was crowned Miss New York City, a Miss America pageant representative told Myerson, who is Jewish, to change her name. "They said Bessie Myerson was not a good professional name," she recalls. The Bronx-born daughter of an immigrant housepainter refused: "I said, 'I live in a cooperative with 250 other families, all of them Jewish. If I win, they'll feel very, very good, but if I change my name, they won't even know it's me.'"

Indeed, when she became the first Jewish Miss America—and the first to have graduated from college before winning—the auditorium was filled with a large number of Jews who had read about her in the papers. "I remember watching people embrace and throw things in the air," she says. "There was this exhilarating outburst." But not everyone was pleased. During her reign, Myerson often was met with rejection and dis-

crimination. While visiting a veteran's hospital in Atlantic City, she says, the mother of a soldier injured in World War II told her, "I don't want you to come in here. My son lost his legs because he went to war to save the Jews." Such incidents only inspired Myerson. "I just went out there," she says, "as a spokesperson for cooperative existence."

Once her year was over, Myerson used her \$5,000 Miss America scholarship to study music at Columbia University. In 1946, she married businessman Allan Wayne, with whom she had a daughter, Barra, now 52 and a screenwriter. That marriage ended in divorce, as did a second, to tax attorney Arnold Grant. Stints on TV game shows *The Big Payoff* and *I've Got a Secret* in the 1950s and '60s and posts in New York City government in the '70s and '80s kept her a popular public figure. Unwanted attention came in 1987, when she was tried—and acquitted—on conspiracy and other charges as a result of a political scandal. Now 75, Myerson looks back on her reign with pride. "I felt it was an important victory," she says. "I won and I hadn't changed my name."

ANN STASSER/ARND BRONKHORST

"I loved it, but it became stressful," says Whitestone (with son John) of the gig.



HEATHER WHITESTONE

The pageant audience didn't notice, but Whitestone was in trouble. The stage was too dark for the former Miss Alabama, who is deaf, to read the announcer's lips, and she didn't know when to walk across stage. Needing a cue, Whitestone turned to contestants beside her. "They could have made me look foolish, but they helped me," she says. "It meant everything to me."

Not all of Whitestone's memories are so rosy. The first Miss America with a physical disability, she has mixed emotions about her reign and the controversy she provoked. "The deaf community criticized me for reading lips instead of signing," says Whitestone, who lost her hearing in infancy due to a reaction to antibiotics. "They didn't like that I was speaking."

Now 27 and living in Atlanta with husband John McCallum, 30, an entrepreneur, and son John, 9 months old, the full-time mom reflects on the intense year with a sigh. "I was more than glad to hand the crown over," she says.



1995

