

Russians come together to build community among immigrants; Pacific Beach woman vying for Miss Russian title

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Published - 08/26/18 - 08:05 AM | 1061 views | 0 | 1 | | |

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Miss Russian contestants. The pageant will take place Sunday, Sept. 16 at the California Center for the Arts (340 N Escondido Blvd.).

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Hanna (Ann) Datskevich, a contestant from Pacific Beach.



Daryana Mikhniuk, a contestant from La Jolla.

After 20 years, there will once again be a reigning Miss Russian in San Diego. Partnering with Gorozhanka, San Diego's leading Russian Women's magazine, Olga Solovyeva has worked hard to revive the nonprofit organization, Miss Russian San Diego, since its premier in 1998.

While her involvement with the project initially began with wanting to "fill the emptiness" of her own daughter leaving for college, the pageant has taken on a deeper message.

"We want to show the world that Russian women are not 'mail-order-brides,'" said Solovyeva, who serves as this year's project organizer for the pageant. "Russian women are beautiful and educated. We want to bring peace and resolve conflict between all countries in the world. We are like everyone else. We are not a danger."

Taking place Sunday, Sept. 16 at the California Center for the Arts (340 N Escondido

Blvd.), the pageant will not only consist of a gala concert, fashion show, art showcase and awards ceremony, but will also provide a platform for contestants to share their stories of immigrating to the United States, finding jobs and building a life.

This part of the event is what Daryana Mikhniuk, a contestant from La Jolla, is looking forward to the most.

"I do really miss my home and my family and friends, but here in San Diego we have a huge community of Russian-speaking people and of course bringing them all together... It's going to be fun," said Mikhniuk, who immigrated from Belarus in 2013. "This experience has bonded all of us together as a community. Every time, I'm just shocked by how many Russian-speaking people live in San Diego. Everybody has their own communities, but we can all call ourselves immigrants."

The beauty pageant has also created a family dynamic among the contestants and pageant coordinators. Every Sunday, for three hours, the women get together to rehearse runway modeling, Broadway dancing and public speaking. They've even been on local cooking shows, demonstrating how to cook traditional Russian meals.

"As a team, all of the girls, we're becoming friends," said Mikhniuk. "Recently, all of us went out for dinner and it was like a big family together. We really don't even think it's a competition. It's more like every Sunday we get together and we learn how to dance."

Hanna (Ann) Datskevich, a contestant from Pacific Beach, added: "I've met lots of new girls and they are all different. They're all beautiful, with their own power inside of them. It's amazing."

Datskevich, is also originally from Belarus, and says she was surprised to have met Mikhniuk since her previous home had such strict travel laws.

"Belarus, it's such a closed country," said Datskevich. "It's so complicated and hard to get out of there, so it's been cool to meet others from my country in San Diego. I had no idea so many Russians lived here."

She adds, "We all have our different lives, ways, how we came to United States, how we do our own jobs... people can see that we're different, but we have the same goal: to make this show beautiful."

All the profits for the pageant go to Rady Children's Hospital and Becky's House, a transitional housing shelter for abused women, youth and children. Tickets for both the pageant and the VIP after-party are available on artcenter.org/events.

Solovyeva believes that "everything should be good, if everything will go right," and hopes to continue the pageant next year.

"San Diego is the city of my dreams," said Mikhniuk. "There are so many different people from around the world who live here. For all immigrants, it's a long and difficult journey, and it has bonded all of us together. Everyone has their own stories to tell."

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