

AU student, Miss Alabama International works to erase stigma

Sara Falligant | Opelika-Auburn News | Twitter | Posted: Monday, February 16, 2015 5:56 pm

Miss Alabama International Kaitlyn Hudson, an Auburn University senior, started competing in pageants when she was 9 years old, shortly after her father died. The event changed her life and influenced both her career path and platform as Miss Alabama International.

Hudson, 20, is set to graduate in August with a degree in psychology, the same day she'll walk across the stage at the 2015 Miss International Pageant.

As for her title as Miss Alabama International, Hudson is using her position to erase the stigma of mental illness.

"It's very, very personal to me. When I was 8, my father passed away very tragically, very suddenly. We suspect it had something to do with mental illness," Hudson explained. "My mom suspects, though he was never formally diagnosed, that he had bipolar disorder.

"I had an aunt who committed suicide about a year later who had previously attempted suicide, and that had to do with mental illness," she continued. "My little sister actually has very bad anxiety and a suspected personality disorder. So it's very, very personal to us. And until you see it firsthand and are educated on the subject, I don't think people realize what mental illness is or what it entails. You hear words like 'crazy' or the r-word. And I think those get passed around too much. Stigma really exists because of a lack of education, and that's what I want to do as Miss Alabama International is to educate the public on what mental illness is."

The Eufaula native was officially crowned Miss Alabama International earlier this month. This summer, she'll compete in Jacksonville, Fla., against contestants from around the globe.

"I'll go and compete at Miss International in July and August 1. That should be a very good time, because I'll compete against girls from all over. There's a Miss Japan, Miss Canada. So it really is international," Hudson said.

Hudson started competing in pageants when she was in elementary school. After her father's death, Hudson said her mom put her and her younger sister in dance classes and asked if they wanted to



Beauty queen Kaitlyn Hudson

Miss Alabama International Kaitlyn Hudson on Thursday, Feb. 12, 2015 in Opelika, Ala.

compete in a local pageant “to get our minds off of everything.”

While her sister didn't take to pageantry, Hudson said she loved it immediately.

“My initial platform that I've worked with since basically fifth grade was child literacy,” Hudson explained. “...Then some things happened right around the time I was offered the (Miss Alabama International) title. One of my childhood friends actually committed suicide. And you never would've known. She was one of maybe five or six in a month's, two month's time in period that committed suicide in the Wiregrass Area. So it really hit us hard.”

She added studying psychology at Auburn, with ambitions to earn a graduate degree in clinical mental health counseling, also helped push her to make the de-stigmatization of mental illness her platform.

“I just sat down and thought about it, prayed about it, and realized that there is such a stigma associated with mental illness,” Hudson said. “That's why people are afraid to come forward, and they think they're all alone.

“I think it's a silent disease. It's very common,” she continued. “Actually, one in four people live with mental illness. So that's nearly 60 million people in America every year that live with mental illness. A lot of people don't seek treatment because of the stigma associated with it. So I think just by starting the conversation and really getting the word out there, that would be an extreme help.”

As Miss Alabama International, Hudson hopes to use her “crown as a microphone” to get the word out about mental illness and encourage people to seek treatment.

“As silly as it sounds, when people see you with a crown and a banner on, they tend to listen,” she said. “Even though, I think, society has this misconception of what pageantry is. Why I'm involved in it has nothing to do with the pretty dresses or the pretty hair; it's that I get to champion issues like these.”