

University of Kentucky Alumni Association

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A Crowning
VICTORY

Photo by Mark Cornelison, UK Photo



A *Crowning* VICTORY

CI alumna credits UK for her win of coveted crown and sash

By Sally Scherer



Everything Elle Smith needed to know about becoming Miss USA she learned at the University of Kentucky.

Well, almost.

A '20 CI graduate with a bachelor's degree in broadcast journalism and a minor in political science, Smith was crowned Miss USA in December 2021. She won the Miss Kentucky USA pageant — her first time competing — in 2021.

As Miss USA 2021, Smith, who's 23 and from Springfield, Ohio, will spend a year participating in charity and community events while living in Los Angeles. Her crown and sash come with plenty of travel and a six-figure salary. She'll be working with the National Cervical Cancer Coalition and advocating for cervical cancer awareness and education. It's a cause that's very close to her since her grandmother died of the disease in 2015.

Being a pageant contestant — much less a winner! — wasn't in the forefront of Smith's mind when she came to UK. She had a high school friend who won Miss Ohio Teen USA and Smith had done some modeling in high school, but otherwise she'd only ever had the occasional thought about competing.

Smith decided to attend UK for two reasons: generous scholarship offers and the beauty of the campus. She received the Bluegrass Spirit Scholarship and the William C. Parker Scholarship. And she was impressed with her first view of the campus from the walkway over Limestone that connects the parking garage with main campus.

"I looked at campus from that angle and I said, 'Mom, I've found the school I'm going to. I'm going to UK,'" she said of the view from the pedway.

In high school, Smith participated in choir, orchestra, volleyball and musical theatre. She plays the viola and piano. Her dad is a photographer. Her mother, a classically trained pianist.

Once at UK, she was undecided about a major until her advisor suggested she combine her love of writing and history and take Journalism 101.

She really enjoyed the class, she said, so she signed up for others and after taking Journalism 204, "That's when I really fell in love with journalism."

She became involved on campus as a reporter at the UK Student News Network and as a videographer for the university's Athletics and SEC Network. She served as vice president of the campus chapter of National Association of Black Journalists.

So many of those opportunities, "really prepared me for my first role as a reporter," she said, adding the experience also confirmed what she was good at.

She spent a summer as a Fox News College Associate in Washington, D.C., after graduating.

Her campus involvement benefited her in ways she never imaged at the time, she said.

"There are just so many skills you learn as a reporter that transfer to pageantry," she said. "You have to learn how to be able to speak to anyone." Plus, she had to learn how to be comfortable in front of a television camera, often a live television camera. Also, she had to learn how to ask thoughtful questions and how to be able to professionally answer any questions that were asked of her.

Her relationship with her UK advisor, CI Associate Professor Kakie Urch, had a profound impact on her, too.

"She played a prominent role in my college career and also landing my first job," Smith said. "I could not have gotten my first job without her. I would advise all journalism students to go hang out with her."

Being in Alpha Delta Pi sorority was beneficial as well. Not only did she build friendships, but several of her sorority sisters had participated in, or were participating in, pageants and shared their stories with Smith.

"Living in the (ADPi) house was so fun. My sorority sisters have been so supportive. They've been messaging me. They had watch parties for Miss USA. I watched their pageant journeys. They gave me some advice."

Throughout her four years, "I just fell in love with the campus, the culture, the people and so it was a fun four years at UK," she said.

After graduating in 2020, Smith went to work as a reporter for WHAS-TV, the ABC affiliate in Louisville. She called it her first "big girl job." Two months after starting her TV job she registered for the Miss Kentucky USA pageant.





To prepare, she met with a pageant coach and a personal trainer three times a week. She competed against 46 others, including friends and sorority sisters, and she said the two-day competition seemed more like a fun weekend with girlfriends. The pageant included swimsuit, evening gown and interview segments. She won the title in May 2021.

"I had worked hard and prepared myself. For all my girls that are considering competing, do it. Take it from me, it is 100% worth it," she said after winning the title.

She continued to work at WHAS while serving as Miss Kentucky USA and traveling across the Commonwealth, attending ball games, festivals, parades, meeting people and getting ready for her next competition, Miss USA.



- 1.** Elle Smith won the coveted crown and sash at the 2021 Miss USA pageant on Nov. 29, 2021 at the River Spirit Casino Resort in Tulsa, Oklahoma.
- 2.** Elle Smith and her grandmother Amy Deer Smith in 2015. Her grandmother died from cervical cancer. Smith is now working with the National Cervical Coalition and advocating for awareness and education.
- 3.** While serving as Miss Kentucky USA, Elle Smith spoke to some children at the Hip Hop Festival in West Louisville.
- 4.** Elle and her mom, Lydia Smith, attended a UK home football game in 2016.
- 5.** Elle Smith poses with her father Samuel Clayborne in front of Bowman on graduation day at UK in 2020.
- 6.** Throughout her journey to her Miss USA title, Smith's vision board helped her keep focused on her dream.

Photos provided by Miss USA and Elle Smith

It was like having two full-time jobs, she said. After working at the station, she spent at least three hours a day working with a coach from the state pageant system to prepare for Miss USA. Her days were long, she said.

As part of her preparation, she created a vision board which she placed near her bed so she could see it every morning when she woke up and every evening when she went to bed. Making the collage board was part of her New Year's resolution for 2021 and she was committed to what it represented for her.

In an ordinary black photo frame, she placed words — “pray”, “put the phone down” and “Philippians 4: 6-7” — and pictures — shelves lined with books, groups of beautiful black women, someone writing in a notebook and sunlight peering through clouds.

In the bottom right hand corner of the collage is a photograph of a woman being crowned Miss USA.

“For me it was beneficial,” she said. “It made me ask ‘Where am I?’ ‘Am I working toward these goals?’ I wanted it so badly.”

Smith was crowned Miss USA on Nov. 29 at the River Spirit Casino Resort in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Almost immediately she flew to Eilat, Israel, to represent the U.S. at the 70th Miss Universe pageant on December 12.

“Every time I get asked about what it was like to win Miss

USA, I struggle to find the words. Surreal, a whirlwind, unbelievable are just a few I like to use,” she said.

Smith made it to the top 10 of the 80 contestants in the Miss Universe pageant, competing in the swimsuit and evening gown categories. Miss India Harnaaz Sandhu was crowned the winner.

Now fully in her role as Miss USA, Smith will be moving to LA where, in addition to cervical cancer, she will be an advocate for the Smile Train, a nonprofit that repairs cleft lips and palates and for Best Buddies, a nonprofit dedicated to establishing friendships, employment and leadership development for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

She plans to take full advantage of the opportunities that come her way this year and she's looking forward to visiting all 50 states. And after that?

“I'll show people my 2022 vision board when it's done,” she said, recently. ■



Elle Smith was the ceremonial Y when the cheerleaders spelled out Kentucky during half time at the UK men's basketball game on Jan. 8.

Photo by Chet White, UK Athletics