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**Meet Tony Absher:
Domino's Pizza Manager**

Born April 5, 1963, in Kannapolis, N.C. Tony holds a B.S. degree in Industrial Relations from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He enjoys participating in a variety of sports. Success, as Tony defines it, is knowing what one wants, and more than that, knowing how to get it.

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Pageants source for big bucks

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performers," said Carmen Del Rio, a Dallas-based performer currently touring the Southeast. "They can picture (the stars) in their mind... That's the hard part — selling your person. Videos make it even harder because you have to perfect your role model even more."

Each number leaves the actress dripping in sweat, but the crowd more often than not asks for more. Encores are common, if not routine. But even with mascara and eye shadow running, the performers politely oblige as the call to the stage brings them back for more adulation.

Because each performer must provide her own costuming, this is not a profession or hobby to be entered into lightly. Thousands of dollars are spent on dresses, wigs, shoes, jewelry and cosmetics; companies such as Revlon and Maybelline make a killing. Because the initial investment is so great, usually only the long-time performers make a profit.

But lucrative money is available for the best. Many of the performers travel a circuit of pageants very similar to the preliminaries to Miss America and Miss USA. Like its sister pageants, Miss Gay America has competitions in evening gown, interview and talent with contemporary fashion/sportswear substituting for swimwear.

The reigning Miss Gay America, a N.C. native who makes her home in Greenville, said her entry into female impersonation was little more than a chance happening.

"I did it for a joke during Halloween once," said Lauren Colby, a 21-year-old blond. "To my dismay, I was fortunate enough to, as we say, 'Make the break.' Ever since then I've been doing pageants... It's a tough thing to do, but the money's worth it."

The petite Lauren said it took her four years to win the crown, which she will relinquish next month in Dallas. It's a title that has brought her a year of travel and performances in every state except Hawaii, a package worth approximately \$100,000. She said the experience of traveling six days a week has been terrific but grueling.

"I feel like Diana Ross," Lauren said. "I'm on the road six days a week, and I have no idea what it's like to go home. I wish I could take two weeks in the Caribbean, just laid up drinking margaritas," Lauren said.



When the illusion ends, the reality of fatigue begins

Saturday's gathering of performers brought a congenial atmosphere to the dressing room. But some said a more typical night is not always so copacetic. Lauren said that during her travels she has often encountered the stereotypical "bitchy drag queen."

"The most friction I've ever been involved with has to do with drag," she said. "The competition is so tough... There is a tension when you walk in a dressing room. But being the professional entertainer that I am, I overlook that."

Many performers said they have used impersonation as a non-threatening channel to introduce their straight friends to the gay social scene. One night's attendance was all that was needed for people such as Katrina's business partner and his wife, and they were hooked.

"They enjoyed it as much as we did once they realized that we

weren't a bunch of sick freaks," Katrina said.

The actresses' parents, though, are usually not aware of their moonlighting jobs. Because of its association with homosexuality, many said they chose not to tell their parents.

"They (her parents) don't know I'm a female impersonator," Diana said. "They don't discuss their sex life with me, and I don't discuss my drag life with them."

As the show drew to an end, so did the image. Bottles of cold cream emerged from knapsacks and suitcases, erasing the female persona with just a few wipes of a Kleenex. Baritone voices contrasted with the high-pitched lyrics that seemed to reverberate from those bodies only moments before. But when the lights once again illuminate the stage and the music cranks back up, the performers — and the illusion — will return.



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