

An Interview with Mahogany-- Miss NC-USA 1991

by Ron Huskins

On November 25, 1990, Mahogany of Winston-Salem was crowned Miss NC-USA for 1991 at Club Cabaret in Hickory. Mahogany is the first black person to have ever held that title. The following interview tells where she came from and how she got where she is now-- on the road to the Miss Gay USA Pageant in Louisville, Kentucky.

Mahogany is Wesley Duvall Lawrence. He was born October 30, 1959, in Winston-Salem, NC. His father was in the military and his mother was an English teacher. Because of his father's job, the family moved about frequently, living in the Philippines, Germany, and Spain, which Wesley can remember and would like to return to someday.

When Wesley was ten years old, his family returned to the U.S. to Warner Robins, Georgia, where his only sibling, a sister, was born. Later, the family returned to Winston-Salem, and then moved to Tucson, Arizona. Wesley began high school there, but more importantly, it was there that Wesley came out.

Wesley was 15 years old and living on the nearby Air Force base. He had heard of a gay bar in town called David's. One night he went to the bar and sat outside on the steps because he thought he was too young to get in. Then some guy came out and asked him why he didn't go inside, since it was "chicken night." "That was a term I was going to forever remember...chicken night at David's!"

The first person Wesley met was a female impersonator who he thought was a woman. "I thought she was an attractive girl. Her name was Cecily, and we became very good friends. I found out three weeks later that she was a man," recalls Wesley. This was quite a shock, since he had never even heard of drag before.

But shortly after that, Wesley entered the Miss Frontrunner Pageant at David's and won! "The first song I ever did was 'He Touched Me' by Barbara Streisand, and I wore a dress that, I think, maybe cost \$12," he remembered and laughed. "I won \$500 and I thought, 'Ooooh! What a wonderful way to make money!' That night Mahogany was born, and, eventually, bound for glory!

Wesley admits to being very naive when he first came out. Homosexuality had never been discussed by his family, and he was unaware that it might be an unacceptable sexual orientation. "When I came out and told (my parents), I brought in this big hooped skirt at the time I was



telling them. Not only did I tell them I was gay but that I was a female impersonator. So I don't think it set with them very well initially."

It wasn't long, though, before the nightlife began to take its toll on his grade point average. Wesley was student body president and just short of graduating when he dropped out of school.

Soon afterwards, in 1977, Wesley's parents moved to California, where they live today, and Wesley moved back to Winston-Salem to live with his grandmother and to finish school. But once he learned of the thriving gay nightlife in the Triad, thoughts of school went right out of the window. He got a job at Happy Nights Disco in Greensboro. To get to work, Wesley would hitchhike in drag along I-40 from Winston-Salem to Greensboro, or, for \$7, take the bus. The first person he ever worked with was Brandy Alexander. "She took me under her wing," he remembered fondly. Other 'stars' from that era that she worked with were Pepper Davis, Niki Sage, and Lindsey Lee.

While working in Greensboro, Wesley noticed an ad in an Atlanta gay publication for the Miss South Carolina Pageant. So he got on a bus to Charleston and finished as first runner-up. "Well, I thought if I was first runner-up to Miss SC, I'll enter Miss Florida and finish first runner-up there, too. So I got the bus," he said giggling, "and went all the way to Miami, Florida." He got off the bus in the heat of summer in a gorilla fur coat, big platform shoes, and blue jeans.

That year, there were 25 contestants in the Miss Florida Pageant, and

Mahogany finished 24th! This was quite a slap in the face, especially since he thought he would place and had no money for bus fare home.

That was how she met her best friend, Tiffany Arie August. Tiffany won the pageant that year, and was very grateful when Mahogany found all of Tiffany's pageant dresses which Tiffany had left at the hotel. Mahogany's call to Tiffany about finding the clothes "really cemented our friendship. Tiffany's mother, to this day, thinks of me as her own child because I found those clothes."

Mahogany was loaned enough money to get home on. Upon arrival she called her mom in California and asked her to withdraw money from her college fund. He announced he was dropping out of school and moving to Florida.

Two years later, Mahogany won first runner-up in the Miss Florida Pageant. The following year she didn't even place in the top ten. This caused a riot from the audience and the pageant was stopped for 35 minutes. Finally, Mahogany was asked to go back out on stage to quiet the crowd down. He explained to them that the judges' decision was final and that she would return next year. The audience applauded and the pageant resumed.

Mahogany did return, but not the following year. She finished first runner-up in 1982 and again in 1983. She was finally crowned the new Miss Florida in 1986. She went straight to the Miss Gay Universe Pageant with the title and won!

After the Miss Universe Pageant, Wesley remained in Florida until 1989 when he returned to Winston-Salem. "I just decided I had done everything I could possibly do in the state of Florida as far as competition was concerned. I didn't want to be involved in the Miss America-FFI Pageant, and they didn't have a Miss Gay USA at the time. I really was more interested in going back to school. I was 30 years old and I wanted more."

Then, Wesley bumped into Buddy Brendle, who Wesley had done a show for once in his Asheville bar years earlier. Buddy convinced Mahogany to enter one of the preliminaries to the Miss North Carolina-USA Pageant. After winning Miss Bourbon Street in Winston-Salem, she finished first runner-up in the Miss North Carolina-USA and was crowned Miss NC-USA 1991 this past November in Hickory. In April, she will go on to compete for the Miss Gay USA title in Louisville, Kentucky.

To make North Carolinians familiar with herself and to drum up support for the national competition, Mahogany kicked off a two-month long whirlwind tour at TRAX in Asheville on January 25. She will be criss-crossing the state and East Tennessee twice before the Miss Gay USA Pageant on April 1. During the tour, she will be selling raffle tickets for a free trip to Louisville for the pageant. A portion of the proceeds will go to the North Carolina Royal Court to be

distributed to needy persons with AIDS and AIDS organizations.

As Miss North Carolina-USA, Mahogany would like to become a self-titled 'Racial Harmony Queen.' Mahogany said, "It seems, as evident in this past election, that a lot of people think we are down. We may be down, but not out! I see no reason that the gay community as a whole can't realize that we are all diverse within our own subculture. We must get together and stand on our own two feet and continue to fight against oppression, bigotry, and prejudice."

Wesley still lives in Winston-Salem, and he finally finished school. He is now a freshman at Winston-Salem State University.

During the month of March, you can see Mahogany perform at the following locations:

- March 10, Bourbon St. in Winston-Salem;
- March 16, Club Cabaret in Hickory;
- March 22, The Palms in Greensboro;
- March 23, New Beginnings in Johnson City;
- March 27, Bourbon St. in Winston-Salem;
- March 29, Club Cabaret in Hickory. ▽

