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Social Worker Marsha Morton created the Inner Beauty Project to help girls in foster care build on their strengths and learn to love what sets them apart.

Tiaras gleamed, catching the light with every sashay and turn. The half dozen judges gazed in admiration at the young ladies filing in — shoulders back, chins up, rhinestone smiles across rosy cheeks. In the reception hall, loved ones clutching bouquets of flowers cheered the girls on.

However, this was no traditional beauty pageant. Those gathered were there to honor the 14 young women who strutted down the aisle for qualities often unseen.

The evening marked the completion of the Inner Beauty Project, a five-week experience designed to empower girls in foster care to look beyond outward appearances and appreciate the qualities that make them unique.

The participants attend a variety of workshops and activities that help them tap into their strengths, culminating in a pageant-style event to honor the many facets that make each girl special.

Energized by recurring conversations with young girls on her caseload who could not see their own beauty, Social Worker Marsha Morton of the Department of Children and Family Services’ (DCFS) Torrance Regional Office started the Inner Beauty Project in 2012.

“I wanted to create something to emphasize their inner strengths and help them see that they have so many wonderful qualities,” Marsha said.

This year’s participants ranged in age from 12 to 21 and were encouraged to embrace the Girl Boss theme, which emphasized career exploration and ownership of personal narratives. Activities included kickboxing, yoga, meditation and financial literacy workshops. The young women also developed their own lip glosses and marketing campaigns as they learned what it takes to start a business, proudly displaying their products at the pageant.

“My hope is that this experience taught the girls how to manage stressful environments, empowered them to take control, and strengthened their confidence as they transition to adulthood,” Marsha said.

The event also offered the girls a chance to share their talents with friends and family. Some of the young people took the stage to demonstrate their dancing and singing abilities, while others chose to recite original poems.



The 14 honorees pose with 2023 Miss California USA Tianna Clark, who encouraged the young women to remain confident, follow their dreams and continue developing their skills.

After 11 years of managing the event, Marsha hopes that the Inner Beauty Project will continue to inspire young people beyond her time at DCFS. For now, she is loving every moment, her passion fueled by watching youth blossom during the process and witnessing the dedication that makes everything possible.

"I simply cannot make this happen without partners from the local church, community organizations and DCFS, many of whom give their own time," she said. "I may be the glue that makes it all stick for now, but this is truly a collaborative effort all around."



LA36 was there to capture the magic of the Inner Beauty Pageant.

Watch the segment now!

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