

# Iowa Bystander

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## A Royal Journey Back To Our Roots-The Gambia



From left: Deborah Jones (formerly of Des Moines), Lori A Young, Debra Carr, and Veola Perry.

The journey to The Gambia-West Africa for the staff and contestants of the Miss Black USA pageant began more than 20 years ago. It ended on June 1st, 2007 with the crowning of Miss Black Tennessee, Kalilah Allen Harris, as Miss Black USA 2007. A small but capable delegation of Iowans was there to witness this historic occasion and rejoice in contributions of service in the successful pageant event.

Iowans attending the Miss Black USA pageant in The Gambia included:

- Debra Carr, State Director-Miss Black Iowa USA and National Advisory Board member acting as Director of Pageant Operations
- Lori A. Young, Assistant Director of Operations
- Veola Perry, Associate Director of Operations
- Kat Bastian, First Lady of St. Paul AME Church, Administrative Assistant to the Pageant Founder
- Deborah Jones (very recent former Iowan), handled VIPs and Judges and also conducted an etiquette workshop for the contestants.
- Deb Engel of Winterset, author and President of GoldenTree Communications and co-founder of Tending Your Inner Garden designed and published the pageant souvenir booklet. Deb also served a preliminary pageant judge.
- Courtney Wolf, designer and writer at GoldenTree Communications also contributed to the pageant souvenir booklet and helped with general needs during pageant week. All worked very hard in their volunteer capacities, not only at the Pageant but in the months leading up to it. Each thankful for the anointed opportunity to serve and to visit the motherland, all seven women spoke of how the experience changed them, changed their perspective on life, and increased their awareness of who they are as part of the human race. Debra probably sums it up best, "I have personally grown from this experience as I have witnessed first hand, the strength, unity, and humility of the Gambian people. The outpouring of love and the feeling of kinship was like none other. I've gained a deeper appreciation of my purpose and existence as a black women in the world and as a result have formed a lasting bond to the people of the Gambia.

### A Journey Begins with a Single Step

Over 20 years ago, in 1987, Karen Arrington of Washington D.C. was a young black professional woman not more than 25 years old herself. But she had a dream to create a forum for African-American women to showcase their knowledge and talent on a state and national platform while promoting public service. A dream was born.

Ms. Arrington's dream soon ignited a spark across the nation as state pageants were held and state winners crowned. Miss Black Iowa State Director, Debra Carr, was there from the beginning. The year was 1987.

Since that time more than 300 young African-American women from more than 44 states have received the unique opportunity to be seen and heard while competing for over \$100,000 in scholarship monies awarded.

### A New Level of Excellence

This year, the 2007 pageant, reached a new level of excellence. Over 100 Black Americans, including contestants from 36 states, their guests, and Miss Black USA staff took a royal journey back to their roots. For the first time ever, the pageant was held outside the United States in beautiful Banjul, The Gambia, West Africa. This year the Honorary Chair was His Excellency, President A.J. Jammeh and several members of his Cabinet. When reflecting on the investment President Jammeh put into a Black American organization, Debra Carr said, "The experience was a demonstration of vision, leadership, love and humility. I am extremely grateful and humbled by the gratitude bestowed upon us by His Excellency. I thank all of those from Iowa who trusted me enough to take this journey. I will forever be grateful to them for their love and support."

### A Lifetime of Memories in 14 Days

The pageant preliminaries actually began with a 3-day stay in Washington, D.C. From there nearly 100 Black Americans flew from JFK International Airport in New York City to Casablanca, Morocco in Northern Africa. They spent their 14-hour layover in Casablanca, dining at some of the finer restaurants for breakfast and lunch, sightseeing, and shopping. Next stop on this 36-hour journey was Dakar, Senegal and finally they arrived in Banjul, Gambia at 3:45 a.m. The Miss Black USA delegation was warmly welcomed to the land to which the late Alex Haley, author of the award-winning novel, ROOTS, traced his ancestry. The Gambian government spared no expense in entertaining their newfound brothers and sisters of the Diaspora beginning with a welcome parade at the Banjul International airport attended by more than 300 Gambians.

### The Sights, The Sounds, The People of The Gambia

The eight-day visit was filled with appearances, media coverage, receptions, and tours. The contestants were blessed to attend the President's birthday celebration at the newly opened 5-star Sheraton Resort and attended an invitation-only welcome reception hosted by the U.S. Ambassador to The Gambia, Mr. Joseph Stafford, and his wife in their lovely home. But that was just the first 2 days! The contestants also visited the New Youndum Basic Middle School and witnessed the dedication of a library in the Miss Black USA name, hiked through the historic Makasuto Forest, and enjoyed a couture fashion show by the Association of Fashion Designers of The Gambia.

The highlight of the visit, however, was a 4-hour cruise on the Atlantic Ocean to legendary James Island. This is where captured Africans from nearby Juffereh Village (Alex Haley's homeland) were imprisoned and held before taking the treacherous Middle Passage to America to become slaves. The Miss Black USA contestants stood in the tiny caves that our ancestors stood in for up to the 3 weeks at a time



Miss Black Iowa USA 2007 Ventra Boykin

before being wrenched from their families and homes. That day, many tears were shed and many souls transformed by the once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Next the contestants reboarded the cruiser and traveled a little further down the Atlantic Ocean to the village Juffereh where they were greeted by Kunte Kinte's oldest living relative. The villagers, over 400 strong, greeted the contestants with song, dance, and gifts.

A lasting element to this journey is the "pen pals". These are young, Gambian girls ranging in age from 13 – 21 who are exceptional students. Each young Gambian girl was paired with either a Miss Black USA contestant or Miss Black USA pageant official. The young girls went on all public appearance with their Miss Black USA pen pal, including the pageant preliminaries and final competition. Addresses and phone numbers were exchanged along with gifts of appreciation in hopes that these pairings will continue to live on for years to come. A bridge of love was built among a people, among sisters!

#### Miss Black Iowa – Ventra Boykin – Makes Us Proud

Miss Black Iowa USA 2007, Ventra Boykin, did an outstanding job representing Iowa on the national stage. She was selected as one of the top 16 semi-finalist and hence competed in all four pageant categories in the Gambia in front of an audience of hundreds. Ventra's talent was particularly stunning as she delivered it with style and impact. Ventra also received a \$5,000 cash award, as well as a full-tuition scholarship award to attend graduate school. Her gratitude to Miss Black USA and the people of the Gambia is deeply felt: "The loving reception from my Gambian family, the culture, and the phenomenal spirits of the people there – gave me a renewed sense of self, pride and history. I walked away with the true essence of completion and contentment. "The Royal Journey Back to Our Roots" was indescribable."

For more information about Miss Black USA, the 2007 pageant, and the new reigning queen, visit their website, [www.missblackusa.org](http://www.missblackusa.org).

#### Learn More & Get Involved in Miss Black Iowa USA

If you would like to learn more about Miss Black Iowa, from how you can volunteer, to entering the 2008 competition to be held in November this year, a free informational meeting and thank-you reception will be held on Saturday, July 28, 2007, 7:00 pm - 9:00 p.m. at the Des Moines Botanical Center. Ventra Boykin, Miss Black Iowa USA will be in attendance and share her reflections on the national competition and The Gambia.

Interested parties should RSVP by calling 515-830-1662.