

"I'm told I'm the first disabled person in New Zealand to enter a Miss World beauty pageant."

"I won a beauty contest in my wheelchair"

Melinda Bennett, 23, rolled away from the Miss World Hawke's Bay beauty pageant with prizes galore.

Growing up with muscular dystrophy, the simplest things were a struggle. I have a type of muscular dystrophy called Friedreich's Ataxia (FA) – it's the degeneration of nerves and tightening of muscles. I was diagnosed when I was 10, but Mum noticed at an early age that I had bad coordination. She took me to see doctors and was told I was "just a clumsy kid". Finally, I underwent an MRI scan (a full-body x-ray) and other neurological tests, and was diagnosed with FA.

By the age of 14, I had to use a wheelchair. I had a terrible time at school with kids teasing me because I walked and talked "funny". I used to let the taunts get to me, but now I'm old enough to look back and have pity on those kids for not understanding that everyone is different.

Because of my condition, my heart gets tired fast and my coordination isn't very good. My speech is also affected so I sound slurred, especially when I'm tired. There isn't a cure for FA but I believe one will be found soon.

I've always had big dreams and always had people say that my disability would

prevent me from achieving them. Wanting to prove people wrong was a major reason for entering the Miss World Hawke's Bay beauty pageant. I saw an ad in the local paper to apply for the regional heat, which was run by an agency called Runway Models. The contest's slogan was "Beauty With A Purpose" and I decided my purpose was to show that people with disabilities are able to chase their dreams.

My friend Janine rang for an application. We filled it out and a photographer friend took some head shots for me to submit. Presbyterian Support kindly paid my sponsorship into the competition and I became Miss Presbyterian Support. After submitting the application, the agency in charge rang and asked if I could come in for an interview. I was in!

The rehearsals were held upstairs and, with no elevator, I had to be carried up the stairs. The other contestants seemed a bit unsure of how to behave around me at first. Fortunately, as time moved on and we spent time together doing promotions, the girls became friendlier.

Competing in the pageant was hard. At our first promotion I was lifted onto a skinny catwalk. As I waited for someone to appear to push me, the music started and I realised the organisers hadn't arranged for anyone to help. I nearly burst into tears, but I summoned all the courage I had and wheeled myself down the narrow catwalk, praying not to fall off the side.

The New Zealand press was so encouraging. The local newspaper, *HBToday*, covered my story, and a TV show called *The Holmes Show* contacted me with reporter Maramena Roderick asking to film me for a story on TV. I was nervous that the people watching would laugh at me, but Maramena convinced me to do it.

The day before the pageant, Maramena and her cameraman flew down to Napier, where I live, to do the interview. The day of the pageant they followed me as I spent four hours getting ready at the hairdresser and

settling into my dressing room. I had my make-up applied and then it was show time. There were several segments – daywear, swimwear, eveningwear – and then the final judging.

A model named Richard was asked by Runway Models to escort me on the catwalk. Richard was great – he came to rehearsals so he could push my wheelchair in the same style to how the other contestants were moving. When Richard and I took our first few steps onstage, the crowd was deafening. I couldn't help but smile, knowing they were cheering and supporting me.

We waited for the judges to make their final decisions and, after what seemed like an eternity, we were called onstage. When the judges announced that I had won the title Miss Personality, I was stoked. I got a big bunch of flowers, a trophy and a sash. Then they announced second runner-up, and then the first runner-up – suddenly the crowd was cheering again, and I even started to clap before I realised that it was me. Another sash was put over my head and I received another big bouquet of flowers and a voucher from Runway Models for a modelling portfolio.

As a result of the pageant, I've had articles written about me in magazines. I love the limelight! I've also received lots of letters from well-wishers all around New Zealand. I'm told that I'm the first disabled person in New Zealand to enter a Miss World beauty pageant, and possibly the first in the world.

I really like modelling – I'm hoping to join an agency. I can't tell what my future holds, but I believe it's nothing but opportunity. Life is best when you roll with it, and having FA is part of my life.

As told to Christine Knight

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For more info on muscular dystrophy, log onto www.mda.org.au. To find out about Miss World pageants, check out www.missworld.org.