

# Queens of Slippery Rock

*There are few things you own. What you own is what you have inside. I have a great knowledge of who I am and what I'm capable of. When I look back at it, Homecoming was a part of that independence journey.*

—Queen Roslyn Stutz Ionta (1969)

The complicated stigma surrounding the honoring of women is old but persistent. Negative portrayals of horrible prom queens seemingly populate every high school film; add in sneaky pageant women and the classic evil-queen persona and it is no wonder the traditions of prom, homecoming, and beauty pageants are often seen as superficial, demeaning even.



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The women competing for these various titles are often portrayed as unintelligent, to the point of incoherence. In *Miss Congeniality* (Warner Brothers 2000), a pageant contestant is asked to describe her perfect romantic date. She responds, “That’s a tough one. I’d have to say April twenty-fifth, because it’s not too hot and not too cold” to a quiet and confused audience. This portrayal is all-too common.

Think of the Regina George types from *Mean Girls* (Paramount, 2004), a stereotypical hot, popular blonde running

her high school with her posse of friends, The Plastics. Regina was a shoo-in for queen as the whole school looked up to her and admired her for her beauty but mainly because everyone wanted to be like her. Regina was popular, rich, and beautiful yet beneath that surface she was manipulative, abusive, and cruel. When the nominees for school's Spring Fling Queen are announced Regina and The Plastics are shocked to hear that one of the outsiders, an artist, was nominated for queen. This artist shared none of the characteristics Regina celebrated. Think about how few times the women we see on screen who aspire to be queens of their schools are given qualities other than daft or diabolical. As millennials, as college-aged women, we wanted to think of ourselves as open-minded. And yet, before this project started, the two of us so easily assumed Homecoming Queens were simply (and reductively) just the prettiest, most popular women on campus whom everyone loved (or loved to hate). And they were crowned in silly and superficial ceremonies during a football game neither of us attended until this year, our last year, while in the midst of this research project.

We were wrong.

Examining a seventy-fives-plus-year -old tradition sparked our interest. We wanted to know if these events were part of a living history at Slippery Rock University, if these women would still be remembered and honored, both recent Queens and those from decades earlier. And if so, by whom? Or whether we were simply chasing an *ignis fatuus*, brief flashes from long-ago afternoons in October and May only preserved in dusty yearbooks and lonely social media posts. And if in ten, twenty, or fifty years, two graduating seniors from

the English Department come looking for answers, would it matter?

On the surface, the stigma seemed accurate. Queens tended to be gorgeous women with outgoing personalities, beautiful extroverts. Before we met and interviewed any of our school's Queens, what we did know for certain was they were always placed on a stage to be gawked at while they waved, smiled broadly, and accepted compliments, flowers, and gifts. A panel of judges or students seemingly always picked an attractive and extroverted woman, dubbed her better than the rest, and called her their Queen. So, we began making doing research and phone calls.

Slippery Rock was founded in 1889 to train educators. Known then as Slippery Rock State Normal School, the old class photos show mostly women, tireless souls who would populate the front of classrooms in Western Pennsylvania for generations. In 1926 it became a four-year teachers college, churning out even more graduates each May for the state of Pennsylvania and beyond its borders, the shock troops of developing minds.

Slippery Rock has been crowning Queens of various kinds since the early 1900s, beginning with the May Queen celebration. For a woman to be chosen as the May Queen, an organization (such as a sorority, fraternity, academic society, or club) would first nominate her. She would be interviewed by a panel of local, successful business owners. The interview narrowed down the number of women nominated to forty or so contestants. Then each of the women, dressed in evening gowns, paraded across a stage and were asked two questions. Depending on how they answered, the panel eliminated or

kept them for another round of questions. Finally, the panel would choose one woman to be crowned May Queen.

From the outside, reading about this business decades later, the May Queen pageant especially seemed merely to consist of women prancing around on a stage wearing glittery dresses and answering questions for prizes. A superficial competition where women were objectified and the most beautiful was chosen to wear a crown, everything we had come to expect, the smug confirmation of our own assumptions. May Queen Linda Gill Jones (1969) tells us, “Suddenly I was the ‘it girl.’ I hate to make it sound like that. Before that you were one of the pretty, semi-popular girls, then overnight you were supposedly different.” This sudden a transformation of ordinary student into a Queen as a way to set the extraordinary apart from the ordinary did not sound entirely positive. If college is a kind of meritocracy, then it seemed un-collegiate, undemocratic even.

Many of the Queens we spoke with acknowledge some negativity surrounding being crowned and how it affected them long after college. Homecoming Queen Maria Montaro (2013) admits, “I don’t put it on my résumé. I don’t want them to think, ‘Oh, she was Miss Popular’ because I don’t think of myself that way at all.” Homecoming Queen Tori Hill (2016) agrees, adding, it’s like a popularity contest—I don’t like to say that—but it kind of is. I’m not going to go to my job or when I apply for a job be like ‘well I was Homecoming Queen so you should hire me.’ I don’t think that it will really go that far but it is nice to be recognized. I’m a part of history and I love it.”



Queen Judy Sinchak Wingenroth (1964)  
(Photo courtesy of Slippery Rock University Archives)

Through our research and because of the initial interviews, our ideas began to shift. We were still unsure sure if getting a plastic tiara and a bouquet of flowers was worth it. Neither of us had ever attended any Homecoming activities that had to do with crowning a queen until this year. We had always written it off as a waste of time. In high school we saw how the preppy, beautiful cheerleader always got the crown. Neither of us thought there would be any difference in college and since college is a chance to learn on your own terms, we had opted out.

Currently almost 9,000 undergraduate and graduate students as of this writing call Slippery Rock home—at least

for a handful of years, that is. Slippery Rock has one McDonald's with a drive-thru, one grocery store, and only two bars that serve alcohol. "Downtown" is one block more or less of picturesque restaurants like Camelot (American), Nico's (Italian), Compadres (Mexican), En Lai (Chinese), and the oldest, a fond memory for alumni at Homecoming, Bob's Subs. There are a few shops, a jewelry store and a hair salon, and everything is lit by new electric street lights made to look like old gas lamps. Queen Linda Gill Jones expressed great fondness for Slippery Rock being "in a bubble." The scenery may not be changing but the people and the voices within our bubble were certainly changing over the decades.

Beginning in the 1940s, women had two chances to shine. The May Queens began facing competition from a new annual tradition—Homecoming. Following a national zeitgeist in the beginning of this second tradition, each class of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors, would nominate and vote on one woman to represent them. These four women represented not only their class level, but also the entire student body. As Homecoming Queen Judy Sinchak Wingenroth (1964) said, "Your class nominated you and that's what made it so special . . . to think that other people thought something of you." Although this class vote for the Homecoming Queen changed soon after to the tradition we know today, one woman being elected to represent all class levels, the tradition of only students voting for Homecoming Queen began here.

In the late 60s, the rules for how the women were chosen for Homecoming Queen began to shift. Enrollment at Slippery Rock University from 1960 to 1970 rose from 1,314

to 5,446 students. With such a large increase in students, it was no longer feasible to gather an entire class to vote for a woman to represent them. Instead, a registered student organization, club, or residence hall would nominate a candidate for Queen. Candidates had to be full-time students and a GPA above 2.5. Most of our interviewed Queens relished in the support of their organization. "Green and white society nominated me, so I accepted," Homecoming Queen Kaci Vandergrift (2015) confides, "[and] if it wasn't for them standing behind me with their support, I probably wouldn't have done it." Queen Kaci Vandergrift is one of many queens who told us their organizations made all the difference. Although the queen reigns with only her king by her side, the support of those around her can make all the difference between being Queen or an also-ran.

Candidates may also run as independents. They too need the support of their fellow students, proven by obtaining at least fifty full time student signatures on a petition. They cannot have served on Homecoming court before, and must meet the same academic requirements.

This is a rarer occurrence, but some women we spoke to regretted not running as an independent. "If there's one thing that I would have done differently is I would have run as an independent," Queen Roslyn Stutz confesses, "I never want to make them feel bad but if I had been true to myself, I would have run as an independent." This thread of independence and confidence shines through every interview we conducted. These women were not chosen by chance, they were the only women for the job.

A panel of staff from the Student Government Association would narrow the list of candidates through interviews. Queen Roslyn Stutz Ionta comments that the questions they asked in the 1960s were “analytically based, relevant to the issues and educational goals of the 1960s, politically relevant, and dealt with how we could be influential to the future.” Queen Linda Gill Jones notes that she was asked about her views on interracial marriage, a potent and of-the-moment topic as her interview was a mere two years after the famous *Loving v. Virginia* case that made anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional. Her second question dealt with describing how she would handle a stressful situation.

After the interviews five women are chosen for Homecoming Court to campaign for a week. The nominees distribute flyers, flood social media, talk to classes, and introduce themselves to seemingly everyone to get their name out on campus. Finally the school casts its secret ballots and the new Queen is announced at halftime during the Homecoming football game.

The year 2011 brought another big change to how the Homecoming Queen was selected. Complaints about the lack of diversity on Homecoming Court led a panel of judges to revoke 2011’s Homecoming Court and permit anyone who submitted an application to run. The process remains in place to this day same except for the removal of the faculty-led interviews.

Taking away the gatekeepers was a way to keep the process more democratic. After all, Homecoming Queen is meant to represent the student body. “Being Homecoming Queen meant being a representative of the university,” explains

Homecoming Queen Sam Hayduk (2010), “somebody who encompasses everything that the university is and all the best aspects about Slippery Rock and I still believe that.” Instead of interviews, staff confirmed each nominee met the requirements to run. Anybody who met these requirements campaigned for a week and then the student body voted for Homecoming Court. The five women voted onto court were announced during the pep rally the night before the Homecoming football game where, at half time, the queen would be announced.

The diversity scandal in 2011 made the people running the Homecoming elections rethink how we view students of color on our predominantly-white campus. On our campus of nearly 9,000 students only 5% are African American, a mere 450 students. Of the 82 Queens we found during our research beginning in 1948, only 5 were African American. And two of those five women were crowned in the past two years: Queen Tori Hill (2016) and Queen Cadi McCoy (2017).

Being a person of color on our campus is a fact that impacts candidates who may consider running for Homecoming Queen. Homecoming Queen Elke Flores Suber (1992) said she had a little voice in the back of her mind during campaigning, “Being a woman of color on a predominantly white campus, I was like, ‘I don’t know what my chances are.’ Not that I didn’t think anybody would embrace me but at the same time I did realize I was a woman of color, a minority on campus, running for a position that is voted on by everyone.” She was successful and said she appreciated how much everyone did support her. She added, “it was an awesome



feeling to be embraced by the university community.” These women were proud to represent the entire school.

All three of the African American Homecoming Queens wanted to use their position to encourage other women, especially women of color. Queen Tori Hill spoke on the importance of being involved and how her organization, Black Action Society (BAS), aims to inspire people on campus, “We’re trying to influence other people and get more females, specifically African American girls, to go out and run for homecoming queen and do what you want to do. Run for positions in student government association, run for things here and there, don’t be afraid to do what you want to do.”

Queen Tori Hill followed through on her goals—Queen Cadi McCoy ran with the support of BAS, like Tori, and was mentored by Tori throughout her campaign, and won.

This theme of empowering women and people all across campus was prominent in all our interviews. Being crowned Queen by the university community was something all of our interviewees reported with deep pride. By all accounts, their reign was a positive experience. Still, the Queens were not impervious to the stigma discussed previously. Homecoming Queen Hollie Carlson (2011) divulges, “It seemed like something that didn’t happen to people. I didn’t know how that worked, so once I got involved with the process and saw how realistic and feasible, and not just like a popularity contest, type of thing that it was.” Through their experiences, their misconceptions (and ours!) were broken and we got the truth of what happens behind the ceremony.

Dismissing the tradition of crowning a queen dismisses the work these women put in to meet strenuous require-

ments and represent their community. Dismissal ignores the positive, long-lasting effects that these women have experienced after their reign. Gaining confidence is one of the best outcomes that these Queens have experienced. Homecoming Queen Karen Lee Grybowski (1964) eloquently shared her experience, “Being Homecoming Queen helped me understand the importance of community, personality, kindness and support. Being given this honor helped build my self-confidence, which gave me the push to help empower other women.”

Queen Elke Flores Suber experienced this same growth, saying being crowned led her “to have more confidence and faith in myself to go out and do bigger things and dare to do big things.” It is clear that this experience helps our Queens be more confident in themselves, but some even commented on why they felt that way. Queen Katie Hill started by saying, “It [Homecoming] changed the way that you view yourself” before explaining why that is: “I didn’t win by chance. I won because I earned it and people saw me as that figure to represent Slippery Rock.” To Queen Katie Hill, her being elected was confirmation that people found inspiration in her.

Not only has being crowned helped these women with their confidence, but the honor gave them a professional upper hand, as well. Queen Maria Montaro commented on how the experience helped her achieve her professional dreams, saying, “Homecoming elevated me in the workplace by giving me the confidence to go out there and do other things after the safety net that is Slippery Rock.” In this job market, having a resumé that gets the attention of employers is a feat. Queen Hollie Carlson continues, “I always put

it on my resumé and people love to talk about it. They're fascinated by it. It never fails that when I interview with my two page resumé that's the [activity] they want to talk about. So it's definitely helped me in that way. People want to talk about Slippery Rock and Homecoming and my experience here." Queen Maria Montaro and Queen Hollie Carlson are only two of the fifteen queens we interviewed and each one of them showed the pride representing their university gave them.



Lynne, Harriet, Queen Roslyn Stutz Ionta, and Barb (1969)  
(Photo courtesy of *Slippery Rock University Archives*)

These women put in hard work and time and leave with new self-confidence. They continued working to empower women who may follow in their footsteps or see them as a role model. Queen Tori Hill (2016) shared that winning

Homecoming Queen to her was extra special to her for one reason: being a role model to her little sisters. She said, "That's who I do it for. My little sisters are everything to me, so I want to encourage them." Encouraging women, young and old, is an idea that all can get behind. There is no better time to embrace the sentiments of the pussy-hat and Me Too movements, especially in our political and social climate of 2018. Though Queen Roslyn Stutz Ionta began her reign in 1969, she still believes this tradition is beneficial for women, "At that time, women were still pretty arm ornaments in many cases. I never saw myself as just a pretty face sitting on a pillow who was going to be cherished by men. That is never what it was about. We were emerging into a world where women started defining themselves by their success, careers, or their accomplishments. Growth for women is so important and it was growth for us." In the year of her reign, there were fewer opportunities for women. Being Queen was a way for women to own their greatness and not feel shame for wanting to be the best.

Women are constantly told they are not enough, criticized for qualities men are applauded for, and cut down professionally. Women, especially women of color, are often disempowered. We must own and take every chance we have to empower ourselves. "I know that being Homecoming Queen has elevated me," explains Queen Tori Hill, "I am able to use my platform and encourage other women. I wanted to encourage other women to strive for what they know they can get." By elevating women who have shown grace, intel-

lect, and compassion to all and letting them inspire others is one of the best steps forward we can take as a university and society.

Our most recent Homecoming Queen, Cadi McCoy, stressed that this tradition needs to continue. When asked if she thought being crowned Homecoming Queen would affect her after college, she responded immediately, “I know that I can do anything I put my mind to. If I really want to achieve something, I can. That is what I will take from all this.” Her power and determination that came from being elected Homecoming Queen are something no one will ever be able to take away from her. All of these remarkable women have showed us that, and more.

Long live the Queens of Slippery Rock.

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