

# Confidence to spare

**Alyshia Shimizu has defied a medical crisis and the bullying that followed to become a positive, outspoken pageant winner**

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Life has been one long test of endurance for 19-year-old Alyshia Shimizu, who could very well be the poster child for philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's belief, "That which does not kill us makes us stronger."

In 2000, at 5 years old, Shimizu fell while playing in the garage at her Wahiawa home, suffering what at first appeared to be the normal scrapes and bruises of childhood. But her seemingly minor injuries became a matter of life and death when necrotizing fasciitis, or flesh-eating bacteria, began consuming her skin and the underlying tissues at a rate of a half-inch every hour.

Her road to recovery has included 28 surgeries and years of physical therapy, but that didn't mend the psychological wounds. Much of her torso bears the scars of the multiple procedures and skin grafts needed to repair the damage.

"It took me this long to accept myself. It's taken 14 years for me to get used to my body," Shimizu said. "Before, when I looked in the mirror, I said, 'I don't want this. I don't like this. I want to die.' I've since learned that it's not what other people say about you that matters, but what I, my family and other people in my life think that matters.

"I used to be so ashamed to show my body. I'd wear everything long. I tried to walk behind everyone so no one could look at me and tease me. I'd wear pants, but the right side would be noticeably skinnier than the other and people could see the crease in the back, so the other kids would call me 'no butt,' and when they found out what happened to me, they'd call me 'disease girl.'"

She has learned to deal with others' cruelty by adopting a positive attitude and is speaking up about her experiences in one of the few public platforms available to teens: a scholarship pageant.

Shimizu has competed in the Miss T.E.E.N. (Teens Exemplifying Excellence Nationally) Hawaii pageant and was named Miss T.E.E.N. Ewa Beach in 2012. She is the reigning Miss T.E.E.N. Ala Moana Hawaii USA and is now competing in the Miss Hawaii Collegiate America pageant set to take place 2 to 4 p.m. Saturday in the Waikiki Beachcomber Hotel's Magic of Polynesia Showroom. Tickets are \$35.

The pageants are opportunities for her to speak out against bullying.

"Bullies try to bring people down. Hurting others is their way of trying to feel better about themselves, but it made me strong," Shimizu said. "They can only get to you if you let them. Having gone through what I have, it doesn't mean I can't reach my goals, and I hope I can inspire others. I realized I have to think positive. I should be happy to be alive.

"I can't say I'm glad I had that experience, even if it made me stronger, because nobody wants to get bullied or go home every day to cry," she said. "Bullies are negative people, and I've learned to stay away from them. When someone is bullied, they may gain motivation to prove themselves, but a person can take only so much. It hurts people physically and emotionally, and suicides can result from bullying."

When the bullying did not stop, her concerned parents, Tony and Annette Shimizu, went to their daughter's school to show a video of what happened to her as a child to raise awareness of the disease and elicit some sympathy and understanding. But life is not a feel-good, after-school TV special, and Shimizu said that tactic backfired.

"For (my classmates) it was entertainment. It just gave them more fuel to make fun of me. It doesn't help as long as there's one person who wants to be a bully. Once one person starts, everybody jumps in, whether they're trying to be 'cool' or just because they're afraid of being bullied themselves."

To gain confidence, she started studying karate at age 8 "because I thought I could save myself if people ganged up on me."

Entering pageants, beginning in 2011, gave her another boost when she found out she wasn't alone in enduring taunts.

"Through my pageant sisters, I realized everybody's been through similar things. Our photos would be posted, and people would say, 'She's too ugly to be in a pageant; what's she doing there?' We would just motivate each other to go on."

And while she previously dressed casually and in sport shoes and flats to attract as little attention as possible, participating in the pageants brought out her inner fashionista.

"I had to wear dresses and heels for the pageant, and, omigod, I love heels. I have a collection and wear whatever I want now. I started wearing shorts and dresses because now I feel comfortable in my own skin.

"My dad was worried when he found out I had to wear a bikini. He didn't want me to do it, but I said it's my time to gain confidence."

What became visible with her midsection revealed was the extent of the childhood infection that started in her right leg and soon spread to one-third of her body. Doctors at Kapiolani Medical Center for Women & Children removed dead flesh until the infection was arrested. Shimizu was put in a clinically induced coma to reduce her pain and was transferred to the Shriners Hospital for Children in Sacramento, Calif., for rehabilitative care.

Shriners typically treats children in the specialty areas of orthopedics, burns, spinal cord injury and cleft lip and palate from birth until their 18th birthday, but due to the extent of her condition, Shimizu said Shriners of Honolulu will continue to cover the costs of her rehabilitative care until she turns 21.

As she grows, the skin around her numerous surgery scars and skin grafts tightens, requiring more "scar revision" surgery; Shimizu will likely endure two more such procedures in the next two years.

Skin was removed from her head and her back for her initial grafts, and although Shimizu said she doesn't remember much of what happened in the hospital when she was 5, she was aware that her hair was gone.

"I was told what was happening to me would be painful but would save my life. I don't remember how it was. I was so young. When I have surgeries now, it's more painful because I'm aware of what's happening."

Shimizu is enrolled in liberal arts classes at Leeward Community College and intends to transfer to the University of Hawaii-West Oahu when a physical therapy program is launched there. She said her Shriners therapist, Lori Mizoguchi, inspired her to enter the field.

"No matter how much I wanted to give up, she would push me, saying, 'You want to get better.' She gave me the strength to go on. If I was tired, she would say, 'You have to do two more.'"

"I became determined to become a physical therapist because she helped me, and I want to want to help others who may feel they want to give up."

Shimizu also expressed appreciation for her family's support, saying her four brothers and sister gave up a lot in parental attention because of her needs. "It was like they had no mom for a couple of years because of me, but they understood and they did things for me because that's what families do. I couldn't have done any of this without my family."