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Statement of Jeri Ward

On August 21st, 2018 in Las Vegas Nevada, I was living my 24-year-old childhood dream of participating in a national level pageant, all while representing a state that I am proud to call home. The opportunity to participate at the Mrs. America pageant was literally my dream come true, and an honor that as a long-term pageant career contestant, I take very seriously. After a full day of strenuous, but fun, rehearsals, the other contestants and I were anxiously awaiting the evening event.

Every night at the Westgate Resort and Casino, where the pageant was being held, the contestants were provided a fabulous dining experience, as well as a lot of laughs and memories to treasure forever. This night in particular, my fellow contestants and I were treated like royalty within the Elvis Suite, on the penthouse level of the resort. As a fine live band played and hors d'oeuvres were served, all of the contestants, hotel staff, pageant staff, and judges, mingled throughout the suite conversing with one another. After four consistent days of being in six inch heels for a majority of the day, I decided I needed to save my feet from further discomfort, as preliminary competition was the next day. I saw that in a room connected to the center of the suite was an extended open sitting room with six contestants present, and one open seat. I sat down in this room in a large arm chair and began to speak with some of the other contestants. Because we were actively posting our excitement and adventure on social media, I began to check my phone as I was receiving more notifications than I could begin to imagine. People drifted in and out of this room, continuing to mingle, as I sat reading all of the social media well-wishes from my friends and family. I've never felt more loved than I did in that moment.

Within ten minutes of my sitting down and addressing social media, I noticed that Mr. Marmel entered the room where I and the other contestants were sitting together. Because of the circular shape of the room, my individual seat was behind where Mr. Marmel entered, and he did not turn around to see that I was present as he addressed the women directly in front of him. I heard Mr. Marmel address the contestants sitting in the room with pleasantries, and then ask if he could sit down, to which the contestants stated yes. I continued to scroll through my phone while

he sat down on the coffee table in the center of the room to speak with the women in front of him. I was not tuned into the conversation until I heard “this is not the 1960s, there are no government agencies to help you people, I know your black men are criminals who need to stop shooting each other, and these black women need to stop having babies”. I immediately looked up and made direct eye contact with Mrs. Delaware, who at the same time glanced over the shoulder of Mr. Marmel and made direct eye contact with me. Mr. Marmel quickly continued on from the aforementioned statement to speaking about the NFL stating: “you need to tell the brothers to stop kneeling and disrespecting my flag and the people that serve the nation”.

I looked back down at my phone in an attempt to gain composure. Mr. Marmel continued stating that he played professional baseball, and when he did so, there were signs throughout the stadium stating “no Jews, and although I will not be stating it here today, the N word”. By this point, I was shocked beyond belief. Mr. Marmel reported that he worked in the newsroom at Ebony Magazine, and how it was the most racist office, and within this office they would use the “N word” freely, and he got a “pass” to use the word because they were “brothers”. The room became quiet for a brief second, and I looked up to notice that Mr. Marmel was rolling up the sleeves to his black, unbuttoned, blazer jacket, followed by rolling up the sleeves to his white button up shirt that was under the jacket. Mr. Marmel then raised his arm up next to Mrs. Missouri, who was sitting on the far left side of him, as to compare their skin color. He laughed, but he was the only one laughing.

At this point I sat my phone down on my lap in disbelief for what was happening directly in front of me. Mr. Marmel put his arm back down from Mrs. Missouri’s side and spoke proudly of the “program he developed with the founder of Ebony Magazine”, and continued in stating that “even during our generation, Mrs. America has had black winners”. All at once, the four contestants in front of him stated that Mrs. America’s name in unison, reiterating the fact that despite Mr. Marmel stating multiple African American winners, there has only been one- to which Mr. Marmel stated that “we’ve also had some first runner-ups”. Once again in unison, the women were able to say the single African American 1st runner-up’s name, as she is the only one, and also Mrs. Delaware’s pageant director.

Casually, Mr. Marmel stood up from the coffee table where he was seated and told the women that he hopes they have enjoyed their Mrs. America experience, and he hopes that they all enjoy the upcoming preliminary competition. Mr. Marmel then left the room, leaving the five of us sitting there in silence staring at one another. I couldn't move. I couldn't speak. For the first time in my entire 30 years of life, I was frozen. If you know me, the inability for me to speak my mind is unheard of. Never in my life have I felt powerless, until this moment. I've never first-hand experienced a culture of people so blatantly, and inaccurately, stereotyped within a 10 minute conversation. I was appalled, and all of a sudden, I was guilty. I became overwhelmingly devastated that within that conversation I was weak, and a part of the problem. I did not stand up for these brilliant, kind, loving, funny, and incredible women when they needed me the most; and I was just as guilty as the man saying these horrible things to them.

The women and I spoke very little immediately following Mr. Marmel's conversation, mostly because we didn't know what to say- I'm unsure we had words available to express what had just happened. I hugged each of the women, and as I became teary eyed, realized that I needed to leave the event early. I made it to the elevator without crying, but as the elevator attendant closed the doors, I began to cry while another contestant present became immediately concerned, hugging me as I explained what had just occurred. I made it back to my room and began to pack my things for competition the following day- mostly to distract myself and attempt to refocus on my task at hand. A couple of hours later, my roommate came back into our room, noticing that I was visibly upset as I was still crying. I told her about the conversation to which she was upset as well, and couldn't believe that the conversation had even occurred. That night I finally laid down at 1:00 am, completely unable to sleep at all during the night.

The following morning I went to my hair and make-up artist's room to have my hair and make-up worked on for the day. During this session, I told my hair and make-up artists and costume creator about the conversation from the previous night; to which one artist stated that she's "not surprised that he said this", as she "has heard many stories from previous years about things he has said to contestants". I did not speak of the conversation again while at the pageant, as we did not know who to trust with the information. The other contestants and I leaned on one another during this time to make it through the remainder of the week, and attempt to enjoy our

pageant experience which we had worked so hard to obtain. When I returned home to Ohio post Mrs. America, I told my husband about what happened, crying again at the conversation the women had to endure, and my inability to stand up for them in that moment.

I'm here today as a thankfully placed bystander from that night. I'm here today because in an environment that is supposed to encourage, uplift, and support women, the exact opposite happened. I'm here today because I witnessed first-hand my friends feel uncomfortable, belittled, and devastated. And I'm here today because I have a moral and social responsibility to fellow members of society to ensure that they feel safe and loved, as they deserve it. I was unable to speak then, but I am able to speak now. I am here to state that as a society, we need to have more conversations on kindness, respect, and a greater curiosity to understand people, and cultures. This unfortunate occurrence that took place at Mrs. America is only a single example of how many African Americans are made to feel every single day, while just attempting to navigate through life. Although beauty pageants are a small world, they are important, and they deserve to be a place of inclusion, equality, and cultural awareness. Furthermore, it's important to educate society on cultural appropriation, and start having real conversations about what cultural appropriation looks like. The words used in the conversation that night were not to be "borrowed" from another culture and used in satire. The conversation that took place that evening never should have happened. Not only was it inappropriate, but also unnecessary.

As sister queens, friends, women, and most importantly fellow human beings, I happily support the conversation of what the Mrs. America Organization can do better to ensure that no more women leave a once in a lifetime experience feeling less than the amazing women that they are. I fully believe and live by Maya Angelou's statement that dignity means that I deserve the best treatment I can receive, and I have the responsibility to give the best treatment that I can to other people. I hope that the courage of these women to come forward and speak about their experience sparks a greater conversation and change in the pageant world for what equality and inclusion truly look like- because this conversation that we are having here today is about so much more than just a beauty pageant. I would like to publicly apologize to these women for my inability to speak up during that time due to my own weaknesses; and I'd like to encourage Mr. Marmel to also apologize for the way that his words made these women feel that evening. As

humans, we all make mistakes and bad decisions, but a larger part of being human is growing from those mistakes and owning your wrong-doings. It is my genuine hope that we all leave this conversation humbly growing in knowledge, acceptance, and respect for one another- as despite what society may present, we are all beautifully equal.

Jeri Ward
Mrs. Ohio America 2018
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