

08/16/18

Dear Miss America Sisters,

I was extremely touched to receive the care package you sent to me in Orlando with your words of encouragement. It was so thoughtful, and it arrived at exactly the time I needed it most. Thank you so much.

I know there's a lot of talk right now about the interview I gave to the Press of Atlantic City. Since my time as Miss America is growing short, I want to clear some things up directly with all of you. I apologize ahead of time for the length of this letter, but be assured that what I'm going to tell you is just the tip of the iceberg.

The rhetoric about empowering women, and openness and transparency, is great; however, the reality is quite different. I am living that difference. To stay silent is to give away my power and the power of the women who will follow me. I am not comfortable with any of us being controlled, manipulated, silenced, or bullied. I'm also not blind to the relationship between manipulation and plausible deniability. By standing up for myself, I am standing up for all the women who will follow me. At this point, my integrity—and saying and doing the right thing—means more to me than whatever punishment may await me.

When I became Miss America, there were three things I truly looked forward to: using my voice, working on behalf of the Make-A-Wish Foundation, and being an example of an empowered young woman of my generation. The reality, though, has been quite different. Let me be blunt: I strongly believe that my voice is not heard nor wanted by our current leadership; nor do they have any interest in knowing who I am and how my experiences relate to positioning the organization for the future. I truly felt more valued, respected, and viewed as a real collaborator within my first three months rather than these last eight months. The differences in treatment are stark.

Our chair and CEO have systematically silenced me, reduced me, marginalized me, and essentially erased me in my role as Miss America in subtle and not-so-subtle ways on a daily basis. After a while, the patterns have clearly emerged, and the sheer accumulation of the disrespect, passive-aggressive behavior, belittlement, and outright exclusion has taken a serious toll.

Shortly after the new board took over, I was given three talking points that I was required to use at every appearance and on which I would be critiqued:

1. Miss America is relevant.
2. The #MeToo movement started with a Miss America, Gretchen Carlson.
3. Gretchen Carlson went to Stanford (I was also allowed to mention my own education at Brown University to show that we are both well-educated leaders).

Right away, the new leadership delivered an important message: There will be only one Miss America at a time, and she isn't me.

To reinforce this, they told me that I'm not important enough to do big interviews, and that the major press is "obviously" reserved for Gretchen. Step out of line there and not only do you get treated to being pulled into the office for a dressing down by Regina, but Brent Adams also joins in on the action.

I was told that it's my fault sponsors have dropped MAO, because I am supposedly "bad at social media." These days I can only post on my personal social media sites. I no longer have the ability to post freely and engage with followers on the official Miss America accounts like all of my predecessors. Even when it comes to sponsors, I no longer have this ability. Last week I posted at an event for CMN Hospitals; a few days later, it was removed. In fact, they have now removed my photo from the official CMN fundraising page and replaced it with last year's Miss America. They post officially for me and as me—misspellings and all—without informing the public that it is not me posting, and often utilize these accounts to promote Gretchen and Regina's activities. When they shrink my voice in this way, it eliminates my chance to be a spokesperson for my generation on the very platforms where we consume our content.

When Gretchen announced the elimination of swimsuit on Good Morning America, I was also in New York. Although I had already been told by Regina that GMA only wanted Gretchen on the segment, I served as my own advocate and asked if I could attend. Our CEO replied, "Oh, we thought you wanted to sleep in—but sure." That morning I stood behind the cameras and filmed Gretchen on the GMA set with my phone. Later that day I passed a producer who recognized me, stopped me, and expressed dismay that she didn't even know I was in the studio. She then asked permission to interview me to get "Miss America's perspective". I truly didn't know what to say to her.

No one needs to remind me that being Miss America is a job. I have known that and prepared myself to be the spokesperson for this organization with every single thing I have done and every experience I have had, learning from each person I met and each conversation I participated in. Such comments are condescending and are meant solely to suggest I don't understand this "big girl job" or how and why Miss America is relevant. That could not be further from the truth.

Gretchen and Brent went to Cannes, representing the organization at a global marketing and advertising conference where Gretchen spoke about Miss America in the era of #MeToo. While they were in France, I was back in North Dakota. If I'd been invited to attend and speak about the relevance of Miss America, I would have been able to tell the world how I, as a young leader, have firsthand knowledge and experience regarding the ways in which MAO is supposedly poised for the future. Such an invitation would require the leadership to care who I am and maybe learn why the judges selected me in the first place.

An organization that values their employees, takes the time to communicate with them. Prior to the July 25th Miss America Orientation, Regina hadn't spoken to me since June 6<sup>th</sup>, and Gretchen hadn't spoken to me since June 15<sup>th</sup>. I wasn't even respected enough to be informed about this year's competition date/when my job would end... I found it out on Twitter. Since many of you haven't had the opportunity to get to know me or have been told "Cara doesn't want to work with you," (which couldn't be further from the truth) here is a little bit more about me. I truly hope you'll agree that my voice could add value to MAO:

1. I am the only person in the office with an all encompassing business degree. I graduated with honors in Business, Entrepreneurship, and Organizations with an emphasis in nonprofit organizations. I feel qualified to comment on how a business should function and how employees should be treated. Did you know that I worked with Ashoka, the leading global organization on social impact innovation and integrations, when I was in college? Did you know I completed my senior honors thesis on the Miss America Organization? I went into this job with a strong background in the workings of the organization. I know its strengths and weakness and could have been a valuable resource during this transition.

2. I have prepared for ups and downs and challenges not just for this job but for any job. My first full-time job was working in Washington, D.C. for Senator John Hoeven. This experience brought me in touch with a wide range of constituents, witnessing their passion for legislation and policies that positively impact their lives. I was working for the Senator during two major events of controversy: 2016 Election and North Dakota's Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). I know the importance of communication because I was listening and responding to all sides of issues. From that job, I was inspired to continue being an advocate as Miss America. I did everything I could this year to take advantage of this opportunity. I even personally paid part of my airfare to attend the 2018 State of the Union because I wanted Miss America represented!
3. Messaged in our leadership's new rhetoric is the importance of women making their own choices and using the universal language of fashion in ways that illustrate and empower them. Working in New York for Agentry PR—a firm specializing in public relations for the fashion industry—gave me a current lens through which to understand what my generation wants to wear and will wear, and how fashion actually can speak about a woman.

In this respect, reality hasn't just failed to live up to the potential, it has been truly disappointing. Throughout my year, MAO did not have a clothing sponsor. I spent all year buying my own appearance wardrobe. Most of what I bought was rejected, and I was told what I wasn't permitted to wear. What happened to the new motto of Miss America getting to express her own sense of style? The office criticized me for wearing certain items too many times. I frequently had to take pictures of all my outfits, and then my tour manager would come into my hotel room and pick out the clothes I was allowed to wear, saying things like "Regina really likes this one" or "You can't wear pink. Regina hates pink." During a photo shoot this year, Regina looked at the Karl Lagerfeld dress I was wearing and said "Yuck. You should burn that. Don't ever wear that again." I eventually reached out to two of the former Miss Americas on the board about some of the issues I had been facing. After Heather French Henry advocated for me, I was reprimanded by Regina who told me that problems and concerns had to be kept "in the family." If a fellow sister who is also a board member is not "in the family," who is?

I understand that I am the representative of a brand and a company and employed to do a job. That does *not* mean that an employer can treat you however they feel like treating you that day. Employers are legally required to provide a workplace free from harassment and bullying. I have been constantly reminded of the provisions in my employment contract that prohibit me from speaking freely:

- "The employee's relationship with the MAO may be terminated at any time, for any reason."
- "The employee agrees that the employee will not disparage or subvert the MAO, nor make any statement reflecting negatively on the MAO or its affiliates, principals, employees, agents, or representatives."
- "During the term, or at any time thereafter, employee shall not disparage or otherwise make any unfavorable statements, oral or written, or perform any act or omission, which is detrimental to the reputation or goodwill of MAO. For purpose of the prior sentence, MAO shall mean MAO, its successors and affiliates, and their officers, directors and employees."

I signed my contract shortly after I was crowned, without an attorney present, and without a member of the staff or the board there to witness it. When the new leadership came in, I hoped that they would loosen things up a bit, at least to make it consistent with the National Contestant Contract that I actually had time to review and which states that I serve until my successor is chosen at the next National Finals.

But that didn't happen. My contract still says—and I am regularly reminded by word and action—that I can be fired anytime, with or without cause. In Orlando, the contestants were interested in seeing the employment contract they will be required to sign, but the leadership would not give anyone a copy. Some asked if they could see mine. I am living the contradiction of being “open and transparent”.

About two weeks ago, I started researching workplace bullying. In the State of New Jersey, it is defined as “deliberate insults, threats, demeaning comments, constant criticism, overbearing supervision, profane outbursts, blatant ostracism, being overworked or simply not communicating with colleagues. More subtle forms of bullying can include withholding or supplying incorrect work-related information, sabotaging projects, passive/aggressive behavior, blocking promotions, providing unclear or contradictory instruction or requesting unnecessary or menial work.” Ultimately, this is my year in a nutshell. Here are some further examples of my time at orientation. Understand that these types of things happen to me every single day.

In Orlando, I watched as the board members and staff sat up front for a meeting with the contestants and state directors, while I was told to go stand in the back of the room and not say anything. When Gretchen and Regina expressed their admiration for me, it was quite disingenuous given our lack of communication, how little they know about me, and especially their false claim that I arrived at 2 am - when in fact I spent the entire prior evening with the teen contestants, attended the MAOT competition, and did my job as Miss America until the last person who wanted to meet me and have their photo taken with me had left the room. The tour manager's flight was delayed, so, for once, I did not have her listening in on every conversation I had, reporting back to the office who I talk to and what I say, nor was I smothered—at least briefly—with a ridiculous level of security charged with making sure people did not get a chance to speak to me one-on-one.

There's also a concerning back channel among the staff and leadership of reporting false information about me. It paints me in a light that is untrue and definitely unfair. You will have to ask yourself what their motives are, because I have given up trying to understand this game. For instance, in Orlando, I was attending the Children's Miracle Network Hospital Dance Marathon. I was told by the tour manager to meet her at a certain time and place. I left my room to get to the appointed spot on time. When she was late, I checked my phone and saw that four minutes before our scheduled meet time, she'd sent me another text changing the location. Before I could even answer her, I received a text meant for one of the security guards assigned to me (sent to me by mistake) where the tour manager claimed that I was “MIA, again!” Reality did not fit this latest fake scenario, as I was not MIA. I never have been. I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

On another night that week, I was excited to host a pizza party for the incoming class of amazing young women eager to learn about the job they are vying for. Contestants were ready for frank and honest dialogue with me. That is also what I was promised. Instead, into the room walked the tour manager and two security guards, Marc Angeli, and Regina, who promptly took their seats. You could feel the mood shift in the room; the message of intimidating me into silence, making sure I “keep it in the family” was sent and received. As if that weren't enough, Regina intentionally belittled me in front of the contestants, seemingly forgetting my name and calling me “Kira”. Of the 5 MAO staff members in attendance, not a single one corrected her. In fact, the next morning the tour manager “pulled a Regina” and identified my name incorrectly again. Several contestants came up to me after and said “ I can't believe they don't know your name.” If I can be so openly belittled—to the point where my actual, personal identity is removed in front of the contestants—it can, and will, happen to them too. It was another low point for me. No Miss America should be humiliated or erased. Ever.

So, I want to ask you a favor. Just take a minute to reflect on how you might feel had you held the title this past year. I never expected my year to be perfect, especially under the circumstances. Imagine what it would be like if you were alone, not knowing who you could trust. Imagine that you finally got up the courage to speak up, not just for yourself, but for the fifty-one women who are dreaming that they will have your job just a month from now. Imagine how it would feel if it was actually two of your fellow Miss Americas who slapped back in the press and threw you under the bus. What you said couldn't be true, right? It must just be that you misunderstood what it meant to have an adult job. I'll skip to the end: it was devastating. Do I not deserve a voice because my experience has been different from theirs?

It *didn't* take me six months to see that my actions reflected on the organization. I understood that on day one. Or that it was a job, and a difficult one at that. That's always been pretty obvious. I don't want to leave this mess for the next Miss America. This is not a self-serving organization, and I want her year to be better than my year. This letter is for her. I don't want her to have to live in constant fear, expecting to be degraded and punished while she should be having an amazing experience. If you want Miss America to be relevant, then the leadership needs to understand she is not a wind-up toy who they can power up to spit out the meaningless words that are put into her mouth, and then put back on the shelf until it's time to do it again. I do not want her to have to stand in the back, literally or metaphorically.

As many of you know, the Press of Atlantic City story posted on a Saturday. As I expected, the retribution was swift. Within 72 hours, I was told my final farewell as Miss America would be cut to a total of 30 seconds for the national telecast. The following day, I was told my custom "Show Me Your Shoes" Parade Costume which had already been made, publicized by the designer, and based on a July 2018 agreement with MAO would no longer be allowed. How will we get sponsors if their word means nothing? Not only are they dictating my final appearance, but they are also reducing my final words. I haven't felt like Miss America for the last 8 months, and now, they are even taking away my goodbye.

I never expected—or wanted—to have to be a whistleblower. I am so saddened that the board seems more inclined to look the other way than to speak out. I ask **you** for **your** help, support, and voices, because I have no doubt that without them, the leadership will simply continue to push out, silence, and tighten security to reduce access around Miss America. Miss America is fragile right now. She needs all of us if she is going to survive.

Cara