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Jermyn native earns Ms. Wheelchair N.Y. title, spreads message at national competition

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Jake Danna Stevens / Staff Photographer

Ms. Wheelchair N.Y. 2012, Dr. Danielle Sheypuk, originally from Jermyn, is a clinical psychologist and wishes to bring awareness about sexuality, relationships and dating for people in wheelchairs.

JERMYN - A pair of beige patent pumps were the perfect finish for her tanned legs. The plunging neckline of her red and white patterned dress showed just the right amount of skin. Danielle Sheypuk flashed a bright, white grin as her soft blonde curls framed her expertly made-up face.

When it comes to glamour, she talks the talk and walks the walk.

And she does it on wheels.

"It's like society is geared to think that no one could or should find someone in a wheelchair sexually attractive," Ms. Sheypuk said. "I feel like my topic is the last taboo of our society. No one ever talks about this."

The 34-year-old Jermyn native was recently crowned Ms. Wheelchair New York on her platform of speaking about dating, relationships and sex for physically disabled people in wheelchairs.

She'll get the chance to spread that message when Ms. Wheelchair New York continues on to compete in the Ms. Wheelchair USA competition July 18-21 in Ohio.

"I want to share that you can be out there and make it a positive experience, and be glamorous and be sexy no matter what kind of disability you have," she said.

Ms. Sheypuk was diagnosed with spinal muscular atrophy when she was 3 years old, and had her first wheelchair by kindergarten. She worked throughout her childhood as an advocate for the Muscular Dystrophy Association locally, then moved to Manhattan after graduating from Marywood University in 2000 with a degree in psychology.

She has used her degree, as well as a doctorate from The New School university, to help herself and others overcome and cope with challenges that come with life in a wheelchair.

Ms. Sheypuk works as a clinical psychologist at the Bensonhurst Outpatient Clinic of South Beach Psychiatric Center in Brooklyn, helping people with mental illness and physical disabilities to talk about dating and the challenges they are presented.

"Dating is hard for everybody, but it's especially hard for people with physical disabilities and in wheelchairs," she said.

One factor is the stereotypes about people with physical disabilities. People in wheelchairs are often seen as asexual, unable to have sex or wouldn't make a good wife or mother. These notions simply aren't true, Ms. Sheypuk said.

Environmental factors also pose problems - a snowy sidewalk in the winter or an attendant that might be present for around-the-clock care.

Self esteem also plays a role in dating, especially dealing with rejection. Ms. Sheypuk recalled a man she went on about three dates with, who said he enjoyed her company and thought she was a great person, but he couldn't see her anymore.

"He felt he just couldn't handle the fact that I was in a wheelchair," she said.

She hopes that by continuing to educate the public, she will help diminish the emotional walls that come with dating someone with a physical disability.

"The best way to break down stereotypes is to keep putting yourself out there," Ms. Sheypuk said.

Armed with a fierce sense of style, a Ph.D. in clinical psychology and personal anecdotes to support what she identifies as a common issue in the physically disabled community, Ms. Sheypuk hopes her message will go beyond the wheelchair pageant.

"Let's be glamorous, let's be dating, let's talk about sex," she said.

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