

FAITH PIERRECHARLES

By Rachelle Legrand

Destroyed houses. Homeless and separated families. People in search of basic necessities. This is what Faith Pierrecharles witnessed firsthand while visiting her parents' home country of Haiti months after Hurricane Matthew hit in October 2016. "We gotta have faith," she repeated to herself as she rode in the back of a pickup truck surveying the destruction all around her. "I literally remember saying that in the car. I just gotta have faith that it's gonna get better. We're gonna figure it out; we're gonna do something, and [the phrase] just stuck."

Seven years later, and the 22-year-old broadcast journalism student has launched her own community service foundation based on that very phrase. The Gotta Have Faith Foundation's primary purpose? To serve and support underprivileged communities — and Faith, herself, has managed to rally a team

nationwide that extends their reach globally. "Gotta have faith" became my mantra, my entire brand, my entire life," she says.

It's no surprise, then, that she saw an opportunity to merge that part of her life with another — her reign as a pageant queen. No, for real, for real. She's held hella pageant titles and currently holds the title of 2022 – 2023 International Junior Miss, a scholarship program that aims to develop and strengthen self-awareness in youth and young women. "I was just like, [there are] all these different organizations out here. Where are the ones that are catered to specific areas in Haiti, specific areas that need help," Faith says. She started hosting fundraisers to help the children in Gonaïves, Haiti, her father's hometown, but these weren't your typical community service projects. "I love doing things where I really

have to put a lot of thought and time into it. ... We actually did a fashion show [at] New York Fashion Week to raise money for a school in Pinot, Haiti, and it was just such a beautiful thing for people to come together, become educated on what's going on in these [developing] countries, and really just understand how important it is for our small efforts to go a long way."

And those small efforts truly did add up.

As the Gotta Have Faith Foundation grew in service and popularity, Faith began getting calls from other pageant sisters in Texas, Mississippi, Hawaii, and even the Philippines, asking how they could contribute. It prompted her to launch a volunteer outreach program with state ambassadors who were able to spread the message of the foundation in their local communities, allowing Gotta Have Faith to expand its community service projects and broaden the amount of people it could help. They've raised more than \$1,000 for women's shelters across the United States; \$1,400 in school supplies for the kids in Pinot, Haiti; and they've participated in breast cancer walks, just to name a few wins. And that's not even the only way ya' girl gives back. Faith is also an advocate for mental health care and currently volunteers at the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

Throughout middle and high school, Faith was bullied for "doing too much" and "dreaming too big," especially in regards to her pageantry. Girls would refuse to sit next to her at lunch, push her into bathroom stalls, and shove her as she walked home. She never said a word about it to anyone. The bullying was so intense, though, she decided to graduate high school early at the age of 16 just to escape the daily harassment. While that helped physically remove her from a bad situation, the silence she kept all those years started to take its toll.

"I have a panic disorder that's associated with school," she says. "Sometimes going on campus can be hard for me because I get flashbacks ... so it definitely caught up with me because I never dealt with it head-on before." Now, she likes to keep things all the way transparent, even posting videos of herself crying on social media. "I wish I had a pageant girl that I saw back in the day that wasn't afraid to show all sides of herself because maybe [it] would have been easier for me to open up."

Everything Faith does is in service to others, whether it's raising money for a cause close to her heart or helping others find their voices and learn to speak up for themselves. "Community service is not a hassle. It's not a task. It's about giving back to those in need."