

LOVING HERSELF FOR WHO SHE'S BECOME

On *The Face Thailand*, Kulchaya 'Candy' Tansiri proved that a transgender woman can compete at the highest level

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As a child, Kulchaya Tansiri was fond of watching TV and wishing one day she could be there on the screen, under the spotlight.

"It seemed such a farfetched dream when I was growing up," said Kulchaya, better known today by her nickname Candy, and also by her title as the winner of *The Face Thailand* Season 5. She is also the first transgender person to ever win in this franchise, originated in the US by supermodel Naomi Campbell, in 2013.

On *The Face Thailand*, Kulchaya competed as part of Miss Universe Thailand 2017 Maria Poonlertlarp's team, with the show's first winner Sabina Meisinger serving as her Master Mentor. Kulchaya has been known as a strong contestant, and in the show's final round held earlier this month, she slayed the runway walk so impressively not even an onstage mishap can deter her from bringing home yet another coveted title.

"After winning this, I don't think it means the world to just LGBT people in general, but also everyone else who feels they're different," Kulchaya said.

To a lot of fans rooting for her, there was also no better time to win than on the first day of LGBT Pride Month, which takes place every June.

Before joining *The Face*, Kulchaya also won transgender beauty pageant Miss Trans Star Thailand 2018, as well as Miss Trans Star International in the same year.

During a recent interview with *Life*, 23-year-old Kulchaya recalled her childhood in Yala province and the eventual



Kulchaya is announced as the winner.

road that brought her to where she is today. From flashy catwalks to elegant pageantry, she took us down memory lane to a country kid who grew up in the Deep South, long plagued by armed conflict and unrest. Upon facing threat, her family relocated to Hat Yai and later on to Chiang Rai, where they now reside.

Kulchaya described her younger self as a nerdy, fat kid, and said she also loved taking part in school activities. She was in on everything, and one could say she's an overachiever. Eventually, she graduated with a degree in cosmetic science with first-class honours from Mae Fah Luang University.

In 2017, Kulchaya competed in Miss Tiffany's Universe, though she was unplaced. She later slayed through Miss Trans Star

and *The Face Thailand* with the dream of becoming a model.

The Face Thailand was originally open for female contestants only. In its third season, the show officially announced that it would welcome transgender contestants, drawing both glee and criticism from its audience. To date, there have been three transgender women on the show, including Kulchaya.

Our latest winner initially felt she wasn't ready to be in this competition. Previous transgender contestants were questioned on-air whether they've had sex-reassignment surgery, making Kulchaya felt maybe she was inadequate. On the show, she herself was also questioned about surgery, to which she responded with the now-famous phrase: "I'll show you that having 'a snake'

isn't gonna be an obstacle.”

That surely wasn't an obstacle, and her victory was testament to that. Now with different titles in the bag, Kulchaya has her sights on becoming an international model, hoping to do her part to bring about a more inclusive modelling industry, open to all genders.

Acting is another area she has her eye on, though she acknowledged that society may not be as open as the TV show she was on. The stereotypes that come with trans portrayal and involvement onscreen can be quite limiting.

“Thai society has its own box of roles LGBT people can play. It's very narrow and difficult to change. But there always has to be a first for everything — the first person to change people's point of view. That takes time because people do have a certain image of transgender people that they see in real life and on TV. With more exposure, I think people will be gradually more used to transgender people and overturn their stereotypes,” she said.

Kulchaya also has her apprehension about taking on the role of joker, which LGBT characters are often associated with.

“I consider myself quite a funny person, and it'll depend on what the story entails. But I can say that I don't really want to further fuel the same old stereotypes.”

Aside from pursuing her career, Kulchaya also does her fair share of advocacy. Back in her university days, she — with the help of activists — sought help from the Committee on the Determination of Unfair Gender Discrimination in order for



Kulchaya Tansiri, the first transgender winner of *The Face Thailand*.

transgender students to be able to wear their uniforms of choice during graduation. Before that, her alma mater didn't allow students who are transgender women to wear female uniforms, not even to class. From her efforts, the university now allows transgender students to dress in clothes they identify with.

"In our daily life, I'd say LGBT people can live quite normally, but people's acceptance does come with conditions. As trans women, you've got to be pretty, talented and be able to do unique things to be accepted. General trans people and famous trans people also have it differently. These conditions still exist, and I really want to see that changed.

"We also need law that is supportive of us, from gender recognition to same-sex marriage," she continued. "Thailand actually has a good foundation as a Buddhist country with kind people. We accept people, to an extent, compared to other countries, even though they're more open in terms of the law. But in their daily life, they can simply walk around and get yelled at, have stuff thrown at them, or even be attacked. We don't have that here. We have quite a good basis already, and now we need the law to complete the picture."

Kulchaya is glad that Thailand finally has someone like Tanwarin Sukkhapisit in parliament who can voice the needs of LGBT people. She also hopes she can play a part in influencing legal changes here in the country.

She has fire in her passion, and the determination to see through her goals. Kulchaya acknowledged that her source of power is largely influenced by the openness of her family. She recalled one time when she was feeling down from an insult. To cheer her up, her mother showed her a photo album her father had made, comprised of photos: a shampoo ad she was in, her university life, her tryout with beauty pageants, and more.

The action, though silent, was very clear in its message. Her parents are very proud and supportive of their transgender daughter.

"I dare say that if my parents hadn't been so accepting of me, I wouldn't be able to do things to my full potential," Kulchaya insisted.

"To all parents with kids who are different: take your kids as someone special and support them. Family is very important. If home ends up becoming an unwelcome place, then your kids will run away. Isn't it

better to accept them and keep them under your care?"

Rejection, criticism and insult may be unavoidable on many LGBT people's journey. Be strong, Kulchaya encouraged. LGBT people and all who are different from the majority are made to withstand the storm.

"Believe in, respect and be proud of the person you are. This is perhaps the first mindset all LGBT people should have. You'll be able to lead a happier life if you have a more open outlook about yourselves," she said.

BELOW
Kulchaya hugs her mother after winning the competition.

BELOW LEFT
Kulchaya on the runway during the final round of *The Face Thailand Season 5*.

