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LA Times - Our Bodies Beautiful

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Our bodies beautiful

A filmmaker intrigued by fashion ideals meets a child about to confront them.

By Elizabeth Kaye McCall, Special to The Times

THEIR lives came together as surely as if it had been scripted — a 12-year-old modeling sensation on the verge of a literal "trip to fame" and a documentary filmmaker on a quest to explore America's obsession with an idealized, superficial beauty.

Four years ago, Darryl Roberts attended L.A. Fashion Week to shoot some footage for his documentary "America the Beautiful," which premiered in March at AFI Dallas International Film Festival and is slated to screen Thursday at the youth-oriented Giffoni Hollywood Film Festival. On a tip from designer Lotta Stenstrom, Roberts made a point of looking for a 12-year-old model named Gerren, who was becoming the talk of the fashion industry.

When Gerren was thrust onto the runway in a wedding gown that, in her rush, a dresser had put on the young model backward, a story line for Roberts' documentary began to emerge. Trying to navigate the runway, Gerren tripped twice on the gown's 20-foot-long train. Finally carrying it to finish her walk, she tried to stay composed as the audience, belatedly realizing her distress, gave her a standing ovation. Backstage, the tears flowed but Gerren had won the hearts of all attending.

"I didn't think too much about it," Roberts says. "About six weeks later, a friend called and said, 'Remember that model girl you were talking about? She's on the cover of the Calendar section of the Los Angeles Times.' " Intrigued, Roberts called Gerren's mother, whom he'd met at the show, to see where things were heading. He spent the next two years following Gerren, whose career became central to his 110-minute documentary — an alternately serious and humorous look at what Americans call beauty.

Roberts says he came up with the idea for "America the Beautiful" after seeing a news report about a photographer who murdered a beautiful model because "if he couldn't have her, nobody could." After reading about a similar killing in Philadelphia, he began thinking about the obsessive extremes people go to in the quest to attain or possess beauty. Extremes that Roberts, who produced the independent film "How U Like Me Now?" on relationships in the '90s, admits to knowing about firsthand: He once bought two Jaguars so a beautiful woman he wanted to

impress could choose her favorite color for their date.

"That was the impetus to send me on this journey, to find out why we are so obsessed with beauty," he says.

As writer, director, producer and narrator for "America the Beautiful," Roberts covers such topics as plastic surgery (even on animals), a female casino employee who was fired for not wearing makeup and thought-provoking parallels between women's monumental gains in society and society's offsetting emphasis on current ideals of beauty and other notions of femininity. The question he's ultimately getting at is whether the preponderance of Americans have become so swayed by appearances that the old adage that true beauty comes from within no longer rings true.

But at the heart of "America the Beautiful" is Gerren, a teen model who got labeled "obese" by the fashion industry at age 14 — as a 6-foot size 4. With a résumé that includes modeling for international designers such as Roberto Cavalli, Richard Tyler, Tommy Hilfiger, DKNY, Nicole Miller and Catherine Malandrino, Gerren went head to head with an industry obsessed with thinness. She was measured in London with 96-centimeter (37.8 inches) hips and told she had to be 90 centimeters (35.4 inches) or under to model in Paris. (Then as now, she weighs 130 pounds.) Even Gerren's mountains of supermodel media coverage — including appearances on "The Oprah Winfrey Show," "Entertainment Tonight" and "Extra" — couldn't get her past the power of the tape measure.

"When I first got into the business I was 12. I didn't know anything about what was happening ... anorexia, bulimia and all that stuff," says Gerren, now 16, as she sits in a sundress and heels at Zen Zoo Tea Café on San Vicente Boulevard, sipping on an herbal chai drink. The conversation turns to models who've recently died from eating disorders. "I have my own mind, but it's hard not to fall into that trap and be one of them ... [but] I just said, 'It's not worth my life.' "

When she was first called obese, Gerren was so upset, she didn't even tell her mother. Now, though, she has more perspective. "If you're a celebrity they will fit anything for you. Beyoncé is a big, beautiful woman. She's curved. If she says [to a designer], 'I want to do your show,' they will find somebody to fit her," says Gerren, who is still a size 4.

A look back

"WHEN I started shooting Gerren, I was living in Los Angeles," says Roberts, now based in Chicago. "I would follow her around almost every day. Initially, she was really shy and didn't talk much, but as time went on, she opened up and became this personable kid."

By the time Kurt Engfehr ("Bowling for Columbine," "Fahrenheit 9/11") came on as co-producer and supervising editor, Roberts had plenty of fodder on how society's beauty obsession was being played out. "With Gerren, you get to see what's being done. If Gerren was a size 2-4 and she's too big ... where do 80%, 90% of all women in society fit in?" Roberts asks.

Gerren, who uses mother Michele Gerren's last name as her given name, originally modeled as Gerren Taylor — a surname coined by her first modeling agency. Now with Elite Model Management, she's simply known as Gerren. "I prefer acting more than modeling now," says the teen, who is taking part in an upcoming reality series about black middle-class family life for BET called "Baldwin Hills." "When I model, I kind of have an alter ego. It's kind of the same with acting," Gerren says.

But the Gerren in "America the Beautiful" is humanly candid — right down to a fight with her mother, who wouldn't let her wear a padded bra to school.

Seeing the film's first screening in Dallas last month was "a shock," says Gerren. "There was a lot of stuff I forgot. There was footage of me when I was 12. It was kind of funny, like me playing with Barbies." It also brought back the difficult times, as when she was called obese. "I forgot how low my self-esteem got, how I felt about myself back then. I started being self-conscious. I thought I had stretch marks." The film shows a different reality. "When I was thinking I was big, I was a stick!"

Because of her experiences, Gerren asked Roberts to take "America the Beautiful" to the Giffoni Hollywood Film Festival, whose participants and jurors are between 9 and 17. "I just want something where people my age can see the movie and see how they react to it," says Gerren.

Though Giffoni is essentially closed to the public, Roberts saw the festival as a good fit. "Young girls are the ones being hardest hit with this standard of beauty phenomenon," says Roberts, who is in talks to show his film at AFI Los Angeles and hopes eventually to find a distributor.

Giffoni coordinator Tracey Arnold says she watched the documentary with her daughters before deciding to include it. "I found it to be really captivating. We should not be pressured by advertising companies or cosmetic industries to define beauty in such a limited way. Who is to say what beauty is? Who is given that privilege?"

Gerren has come to see that for herself. "We can get the hair extensions, the fake nails and makeup, and all that, but the real person's on the inside," says the teen, who balances her career pursuits with volleyball competitions across the country (she's a strong middle blocker for Manhattan Beach's Sunshine Volleyball Club), school and church. "If you have a great personality and can just be yourself, you're beautiful. If you think you're the bomb, you are the bomb."