



Miss Minnesota USA:  
'It really is like living the  
American Dream'

# the Next Chapter

Story by Amy Lyon  
Photo by Brenda Johnson



**N**itaya Panemalaythong giggles and calls herself “goofy, fun and very normal” as she tells the story of entering the dressing room prior to the Miss Minnesota pageant and exclaiming, “Are we having fun yet?” to a roomful of girls in “pageant mode.”

“They weren’t necessarily impressed with my humor,” she says.

But the 26-year-old is fun, smart and incredibly down-to-earth as she totes her Miss Minnesota USA crown and sash in a clear Caboodles-brand case. “I haven’t had a Caboodle since I was little,” she says with a laugh, then seriously adds, “I get to keep the crown and sash.”

As a young girl, Panemalaythong had practical dreams of finding a job where she would be happy, have an opportunity to interact with people and make enough money to provide not only for her future family, but also for her immediate family.

She grew up “very poor,” she says, and remembers filling out forms for herself and her siblings to receive free lunches at school.

“And we couldn’t afford heat, so I remember dad bought a kerosene heater and we’d all sleep in one room,” she says. “I don’t want to put my family through that.”

So it really is no wonder that becoming a Miss Minnesota pageant contestant wasn’t first and foremost on Panemalaythong’s mind.

“I didn’t consider myself a pageant person,” she says, but admits that a friend’s urging and the allure of scholarship money got her attention last spring.

Since winning the competition in November, she has been awarded \$46,500 to attend a Missouri university where she says she’d like to start taking online classes as soon as her life settles down a bit.

“I’m very blessed. There are a lot of women who want this title and have been working at it since they were little,” she says.

And with that in mind, Panemalaythong is laser-focused on preparing for the Miss USA production, which will take her to Las Vegas for three weeks with the competition airing live on NBC June 3 from Planet Hollywood.

In preparing for the competition, contestants have been asked to stay in shape with regular exercise and to send weekly swimsuit photos of themselves to the producers. Panemalaythong is also expected to be

**Nitaya Panemalaythong, pictured in the Savage Public Library, is an ethnic Laotian who was born in a refugee camp in Thailand and who moved to the U.S. when she was still a toddler.**

## Get to know Miss Minnesota 2012

**Nitaya Panemalaythong**

**Age:** 26

**Height:** 5’7”

**Lives in:** Savage

**Occupation:** Technical recruiter at Apex Systems, Inc.

**Named after:** The nurse who delivered her in a Thailand refugee camp

**Firsts:** Miss Minnesota was her first pageant ever entered; first woman from Savage to be crowned Miss Minnesota in the pageant’s 60-year history; first Asian-American to represent the state in the Miss Minnesota USA competition

knowledgeable about current events, which she will be quizzed on during the private interview portion of the competition.

“People do get a misconception of pageants. They think it’s just what they see on TV,” she says, “but you have to make sure you’re up to par with the news.”

At 5-foot-7-inches, Panemalaythong says she’s one of the shorter girls in the running for Miss USA. “I’m running against girls who are 6 feet,” she says. “Ohio, I think, is six-foot-three.”

And while the pageant scene forces Panemalaythong to think about things like her height, eyelash extensions and the adhesive that holds her swimsuit in place, it’s clear that this beauty queen’s priorities lie, first and foremost, with her family.

One of her greatest accomplishments, she says, came when she and her brother-in-law purchased a home in Savage in 2010 for her family. The home is a flurry of activity most days with her parents, three sisters, a younger brother, brother-in-law and two children sharing the space.

The hustle and bustle of the household mirrors the other parts of Panemalaythong’s life right now. She recently started a new job at Apex Systems, Inc. as a technical recruiter, and her mother packs her lunch most days because of her busy schedule.

“She’s a great cook and she wants to make sure I’m healthy,” says Panemalaythong.

She hopes to raise enough money through sponsors to have her whole family in Las Vegas for the Miss USA pageant.

# Chiropractic Corner

with



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**Food Label Reading for Dummies** Monday, May 14th at 7:00 pm through School District 112 Community Education. Register online at <http://www.ce4all.org>

**7 Ways to Avoid the Chiropractor** Tuesday, April 17th at 6:30 pm through School District 112 Community Education. Register online at <http://www.ce4all.org>

**"Fill a Tummy, Warm a Heart" Food Drive:** May 14th - May 26th. Because we love kids and their families, we want to give back to them by filling their tummies. We are offering a spinal check up (including consultation, exam, computerized scans, report of the doctor's findings and first adjustment) for a donation of \$35/person with a donation of food to be donated to our local food shelf.



## NEXT UP ...

The news of Panemalaythong's Miss Minnesota USA crowning has spread quickly across the globe, and she says the Lao community has been "very supportive and has embraced me."

She was invited by the Lao Embassy in Washington, D.C., to attend a private event for the Lao New Year at the end of April. And she was invited by the U.S. Embassy in Laos to travel to the country in September where she will spend two to three weeks speaking at schools about the importance of education, her history and experiences.

For example, she'll likely tell students in Laos that her father had only seven years of education and her mother four, and that made obtaining a college education particularly important to her. And she'll tell the story of how in the '80s, her father built a bamboo raft and escaped Laos with his wife and four children, and how Panemalaythong was born shortly thereafter in a refugee camp in Thailand - named after the nurse who helped her father with her delivery.

"Unfortunately our family wasn't able to provide as much as they would have liked to," she says. "But I look at what they've overcome."

Panemalaythong's reign as Miss Minnesota USA will run through November, and she says she wants to use her title to make a positive difference not only in her community, but also by encouraging young girls to try something new - like entering a pageant.

The Miss USA program doesn't require her to have a platform, but if she chose one, it would be raising awareness and support for Downs syndrome. "My little sister has Downs syndrome."

Panemalaythong says she wants to "do more" once the pageant is over and life slows down a little - unless, of course, she takes the crown and moves on to the Miss Universe competition.

"I'll see where it takes me. I'm still in a whirlwind," she says. "This has taken on a life of its own. It really is like the American dream."

## ABCs of pageantry

**A** fuller head of hair with fusible hair extensions

**B**utt glue (aka It Stays! Body Adhesive ) to hold that swimsuit in place

**C**ontestant photos in swimsuits due each Friday to producers

**D**onning an evening gown by designer Mac Duggal

**E**yelash extensions

**F**ive-inch heels

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