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Desi Making Waves

By **Roopika Risam**

A Model Teacher: Rennu Dhillon

At 44, Rennu Dhillon has distinguished herself in both education and entertainment. Founder of Genius Kids Inc. and producer of the Miss NRI Global pageant, Dhillon inspires women as well as children to be self-confident and comfortable with themselves. The mother of two spoke with ABCDlady about her educational philosophy, her beauty and talent pageants and her secrets for success.

You're a woman of many talents. What do you say when people ask what you do for a living?

When I'm asked what I do for a living, I say what pays my bills: Genius Kids. I've developed an accelerated learning center for kids; our motto is "Never 2 Little 2 Learn."

Tell me about Genius Kids. What age levels attend?

We specialize up to kindergarten, to prepare children for formal school...Developmentally, the best ages for learning are zero to six...We do have programs for older kids but that's not our core audience...Kids as young 22 months come in for 45 minutes of music, phonics, and public speaking. Our two-hour preschool,



Rennu Dhillon. Photographer: [Som Sharma](#)

pre-kindergarten [programs] have students averaging between ages two to five plus. The focus is on communication and public speaking. I believe that if you take children from a young age and give them microphones, you instill self-confidence. So in our school we teach children from a very, very young age to answer questions in front of a group. Our theme is that everyone is born a genius and it's up to you to tap into [the] genius and bring [the] genius out.

With the morning group, we focus on speaking, writing and motor skills. The afternoon group can already read and write. We even have them writing their own stories. When we talk about concepts, I don't want to tell the children that the sky is blue—I want to ask them what they think. Kids are very innocent so they say exactly what they think. Also, we film our children every week, all day long. This builds up their confidence and they love when we put their videos on our website. The children think the Web is just like television and [the] whole world will see what they say. Parents love this and send links to relatives so the kids are excited when people see them and call and say, "I love your poem. You're doing so well."

I love Genius Kids. We just got the award Best School for East Bay Area. We're called the place where you're most likely place to find the next Silicone Valley inventor. Kids learn to think for themselves, through hands on experiments, music and fun learning for two hours—we call it interactive learning. Genius Kids has a lot of high energy.

You've written a book, "Rennu's Reading Recipes"—a book and CD-ROM that teaches children as young as two to three years old to become fluent readers?

Yes, we're launching the next level soon. We're developing an online curriculum—online preschool, e-learning for preschoolers. We should be finished in the next year. The curriculum will feature "Rennu's Math Recipes" and "Rennu's Science Recipes".

"I really admire Rennu. She is an amazing woman who is an inspiring role model to the young women of today. A believer and a doer, she has made her dreams into a reality." --Mikki Singhal, Winner of Mrs. NRI Global 2005.

Is every child capable of learning to read at such a young age?

Every single child, no question about it! Put children in the right environment—put them in [an] environment where they are having fun—they will learn. Forty percent of children are born with Attention Deficit Disorder and parents, especially South Asians, don't want to admit that their children have problems. But these are correctable problems. If you get children at a young age and teach them to focus on fun learning, they will grow up thinking that learning is fun. I believe every child is born a genius. They are like birthday presents, little surprises, and you must open up the surprises, see what's there and enjoy it. Children can't be boring nerds! They have got to be able to socialize, interact, speak, make friends easily—core skills for living in the United States. We're trying to change the mentality of learning, what learning is all about.

Do you have any plans to open more Genius Kids schools?

We plan to go global! I have had requests to open Genius Kids in Singapore, India and Malaysia. We will expand in the United States first. I would have done this sooner but have waited until now because my children are now 19 and 16. I wanted to focus on them and spend time with them. Now that they are older, I can focus more on Genius Kids.

How many hours do you work, in a typical week?

I work all day long—I'm a workaholic. I focus on the children at Genius Kids from nine to three, when the children are there. Everything else takes over after three. After three, I work on curriculum because I'm always looking for new materials, changing programs, and looking for more effective methods. After three, I also focus on hobbies—my [fashion] shows and [pageant] productions.

How did you decide that you wanted to start running beauty pageants?

Since I was a young girl I've been working on fashion shows and participating in them. I wanted to take part in the Miss Femina shows in India but they wouldn't let me because I grew up in Kenya. In Kenya, they wouldn't let me enter the Miss Kenya pageant because I wasn't African. I was a true NRI [Non-Resident Indian]. I didn't belong anywhere in terms of shows. So I dreamed of producing shows for women like myself.

I believe that it's important for Indian women to have a platform. Pageants used to mean parading women across stage—they were beautiful but had no brains. I wanted to create a platform to showcase that Indian women are both beautiful and talented. In 1993, I held the first Miss San Francisco India pageant in the San Francisco Bay Area and the pageants took off from there.

These pageants are very successful because the focus is first on public speaking and communication, and then beauty. Confidence and communication are key. I endorse education and scholarships—our whole focus is on participants achieving their dreams, not targeting [the] acting industry.

What age groups do your pageants cater to?

Here [in the United States], the local pageants are typically 18-29 for the "Miss" pageants and 18+ (no age limit—but we have contestants up to age 55+) for "Mrs." The reason we have "Mrs." pageants is that I don't feel life ends just because you get married. Sometimes Indian women think, "Oh no, I'm married, I can't do shows." So that's another reason we want to endorse "Mrs."—they can continue competing and feel good about themselves.

What kind of segments do your competitions include?

The most crucial segment is called "Self-Expression". What I believe is that every candidate should present herself and show who she is. I give them 45 seconds and they talk about why they should win. They may use their outfits and props to help explain themselves through a little skit. For example, one woman really wanted to be a television reporter, so she came out dressed like a reporter with a large, cardboard television. We use this segment to endorse our shows. Also, we always crown the winner wearing a sari.

In South Asian-oriented pageants nowadays, it seems there is a push not to be "too American." For instance, an American gown is often looked down on, and organizers and contestants prefer Indian outfits. Do you support this belief?

We always crown our winner in a sari only because I feel like the India part should stay there, and I like the uniformity. When I did my world pageant, Miss NRI Global, we had women from 30 countries and everyone wore American evening gowns. Because there were women from places that didn't wear saris, they didn't feel comfortable. So we kept the evening gown instead of the sari.

The women in your pageants all seem to really enjoy the experience and have such positive things to say about you. How are you able to get to know all the contestants when you have all the logistics to take care of?

To me, getting to know the participants is very important. I can feel comfortable getting to know them because my shows are very clean, with no agendas. We use computerized scoring and I don't have anything to do with the scores. For that reason I can easily get to know each girl. In our shows, everything is transparent because scores [are] available immediately. I also feel it's very important that women know who's behind the show. I do the interviews during the selection process because I want to get to know the participants and make sure that they are coming in with the right frame of mind—for the right reasons. Sportsmanship is key and our pageants don't cater to personalities without it at all. I get to know the women and I can do that with a comfort zone knowing I have nothing to hide. Even the judges think twice before favoring a particular contestant—we actually designed an in-house scoring system for our shows.

Tell me about the show you are about to do in India.

What I've done is that there is a gentleman here, Rahul Roy [a California based entrepreneur], who is a regular sponsor for my pageants. He wants to brand himself in India with a show, so we're doing our very first international show—including women who aren't Indian. The competition will run from April 16-23, 2006, with women from 13 countries. The focus is more on modeling and whoever wins will be launched on all of [Roy's company's] products.

Do you hope to make your pageants as popular as Miss America or Miss Universe?

Absolutely! I hope my competitions become as large as Miss Universe. We could be compared to Miss America because of our structure—education, scholarships, for Indian girls all over the world. We treat our participants well—there is no entry fee, they stay in a five-star hotel, their meals are sponsored. We want them to all go back home saying “I’d love to do that again.” That’s the goal.

Do your pageants include contestants from South Asia in general, or just India?

We go with “Undivided India”—our contests are open to all South Asians. Last year’s winner of the Miss NRI Global 2005 was Mehru Khan, from Pakistan.

Do you have any intention of expanding the pageants beyond South Asian women?

I think my focus will be on South Asian women for the pageants, because I don’t want to reinvent the wheel. The other ones are doing a good job—Miss Universe, Miss America, Miss U.S.A. I would rather focus on South Asians. But my modeling competitions are transnational.

Do you feel like your roots are in Kenya or India? If someone asks you about your background, would you say Kenyan or Indian?

Kenya is my home. I’m a Kenyan citizen—I’m Indian, my culture, my heritage—but my country is Kenya.

Where do you see yourself 10 years from now?

My goal is to take Genius Kids globally—Genius Kids all around the world. I would like to be known for that because it’s my passion. I’ve really got something here—happy, successful kids. We had a parent who wrote us from Texas and his child was put into a gifted program at the high school level because of his critical thinking skills and confidence. I have parents saying that I impacted their children, and it really makes me feel like I have done something special. And I would like to share it all over. And of course, I’d like to still be doing pageants and have women around the world doing shows. I want them to believe that they can achieve their dreams, so they can go home and aspire to do what they want.

How do you manage to coordinate two successful careers, raise two girls and still have a life? What is the secret to your success?

Time management! I know exactly what I’m going to be doing at a certain time. When I was raising kids as [a] single mom, I stayed home and worked from there, even though I had lots of opportunities. When they were able to go to school, I was able to go get [a] job. My mom taught me time management—I make sure I spend specific time on specific activities and can balance Genius Kids and the pageants. Also, I believe in networking—and the power of [the] internet makes life so much easier.

The secret to my success is that I really believe you have to be passionate about what you do. I will not do projects I don’t like—I’m really zero percent or 100 percent. In terms of success with my kids—my kids are part of what I do. My daughters are very involved in shows—organizing, seeing rehearsals—and my older daughter is a coordinator for the pageants so we can all spend time together doing them.

My advice: make sure what you do, you do best and right—and keep your family close to you at all times!

Roopika Risam is the Managing Editor of ABCDlady.

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