

Homecoming royalty mark firsts

By Kendra Schwartz

Nearly falling over at the sound of her own name, senior Puja Shah gripped the arm of her partner, Narito Mendez, thankful she wasn't sporting heels beneath her turquoise floor-length gown.

Her equally shocked king, senior Matt Rood, made his way over to Shah and beamed down at her.

"Is this really happening?" Shah asked Rood the second they sat down in their golf cart.

Rood looked out at the field, then back to Shah and shrugged.

Although Shah and Rood were humbled, their wins on Friday night meant much more than a plastic crown, plastic tiara and velvet robes. The wins represented sociocultural change in conservative Kansas.

Rood is thought to be the first openly gay homecoming king at Lawrence High while Shah is the first Indian-American queen.

"Matt is a really unique person, and he's really become confident with who he is, so that's why I was so happy that other people saw what he already knows," Matt's mother, Cyndi Rood, said. "I think that the reason he did win was that he is so confident about who he is, and he will educate people and talk to them about being gay. He doesn't see himself as an activist. He just sees himself as who he is."

Rood is proud of his identity and hopes to encourage others to be proud, too.

"All you tadpole gays better come out right now," Rood said. "There's a lot of not-out youth in Lawrence who I have talked to in the past, and I would love everyone to feel comfortable enough to accept who they are and to come out. It's such a weight off your shoulders."

Rood didn't see being openly gay as a big factor in his selection to homecoming court. Neither did his favorite teacher and Gay-Straight Alliance Club sponsor, Shannon Draper.

"While it is a true testament to the open and accepting world of LHS that we have an openly gay student nominated for Homecoming Court, the best part about Matt Rood being up for this social accolade is that Matt is such a good-hearted person," Draper said, prior to hearing the results. "If Matt wins, it would be incredible not because he's a young gay man but because he is a remarkably honest and kind young man, qualities which define him far more than his orientation."

Shah's win came less than two weeks after Nina Davuluri became the first Indian-American crowned Miss America. Shah admires Davuluri and how she embraced her culture in performing an Indian dance in the competition.

"So I was like, 'why not,' and had them play Jai Ho for my [homecoming video] Vine, and, 'Why not have them accept me for who I am?'" Shah said.

Although Shah is proud of her Indian culture, she refuses to allow race to define her.

"I think for other people it's a bigger deal that I'm a minority and got crowned," Shah said. "For me, first and foremost, I see myself as a student of Lawrence High and not an Indian student. I see myself more as someone who wants to give back to the school what they've given to me in the past few years."

Although Davuluri faced racist backlash on social media after her crowning, Shah does not fear the same negative reactions.

“I’m not too worried about anything, because with Lawrence High, it’s a really accepting community. With Nina Davuluri’s situation, it was more of a national concept,” Shah said. “Obviously there’s always gonna be people who disagree with the outcome, but I can’t let that, and Matt can’t let that stop us from enjoying the fact that this happened to us.”

Although they were initially unfamiliar with the idea of homecoming, Puja’s parents Ashwin and Geeta Shah have realized the importance of this title and supported her through this process.

“[I was] shocked. This makes history for myself, my country,” Ashwin Shah said. “Puja was born here, she lives here, she is American. So to me, it’s America and India coming together. It’s a very good time for change and time for acceptance. I think American people also are looking for the change. They are accepting other people as American as well.”

Always the first to snap pictures of Puja throughout her homecoming week, Ashwin Shah grew increasingly supportive of her spot on court.

“I think my dad has some sort of pride that I’m on homecoming court even though he hasn’t gone through it,” Puja Shah said. “It’s just something that I’m getting recognized for, so they’re there to support me in whatever this homecoming thing is.”

Although both Shah and Rood are humble about their wins, they set a precedent for future courts to embrace diversity.

“This year’s homecoming court was kind of a melting pot,” Shah said. “We had different ethnicities, different aspects of the school. We had the music department, we had athletes, and we had different friend groups. I think that’s a good representation of how LHS is becoming more progressive. It’s nice to see you get recognized just for being involved and being a nice human being.”