

# UCFTODAY

UCF NEWS | STORIES OF IMPACT + INNOVATION | ORLANDO, FL

## Getting to Know Miss USA Hopeful: Ashley Carino

By Heather Smith Lovett | July 29, 2021

Growing up, Ashley Cariño was just as likely to watch an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* as she was a Miss Universe pageant. She dreamed of working for NASA *and* wearing the Miss USA crown.

The 26-year-old is now well on her way to achieving both goals.

Cariño, an [aerospace engineering](#) student at UCF, won the title of Miss Florida in her first pageant competition of her life and will compete for the title of Miss USA in November.

“This was something that for a long time I didn’t think I could do,” she says. “And when I won, I realized that I’m just as capable as anyone. Every woman is powerful, and every woman can accomplish whatever it is they set their mind to.”

Cariño was born in Puerto Rico and moved to Kissimmee when she was 5 years old. She was drawn to science and astronomy for as long as she can remember, and took up robotics and architecture in high school.

She attended Valencia College before transferring to UCF in 2019 through the [DirectConnect](#) to UCF program, where her younger sister Joyce also studies [biomedical sciences](#) as an aspiring doctor.

Although she likely will have to take a hiatus from her final year of studies because of her duties and responsibilities as Miss Florida, she is committed to finishing out her degree, where she is focusing on design and propulsion.

“Aerospace engineering is something that I’ve always dreamed of doing, and I plan on doing so. I would love to work with a company like SpaceX or NASA,” she says. “I don’t care how old I am or how long it takes — I’m going to finish my degree.”

Cariño shares more about her background and her aspirations for representing Florida at the Miss USA pageant where the winner will go on to represent the nation at Miss Universe. If she wins, she will become the second Knight to hold a position of national royalty as UCF [advertising/public relations](#) alum **Erica Dunlap '05** won the title of Miss America in 2004.

### Take us back to the moment when you realized you won Miss Florida. What did you think and feel?

I could literally hear my heartbeat in my ears. I was so nervous. I was telling myself, “OK remember, Ashley, if they call Shakira’s name, that means you won” — it’s confusing because they announce the runner-up’s name first. So I was just repeating that to myself. And when he finally didn’t call my name and he said Shakira’s name, it took me a moment to realize, “Wait. You won — you’re the winner.” I was definitely in shock. I couldn’t believe it.

**How long have you hoped to do something like this?**

My family and I would always watch pageants and I have always loved the glitz and the glamour. We're from Puerto Rico and Hispanics love pageantry. So growing up with that, my family would always encourage me to do it. But I was always shy and a bookworm. I just never dived into it because I was focused on my education and my career. For the last six years I've worked full-time at a mental health agency as a mentor where I use STEM programs to help children use science as a coping mechanism, because for me that's what helped when I was growing up. So I always wanted to do it, but I've never really had the time or confidence to do it until now.

**Miss Florida was your first pageant. What did you learn about the process of the competition?**

It's a lot of work. I had to learn the pageant walk. I had to learn public speaking. The pageantry definitely opened my eyes to a lot of things about myself, because when you're in a pageant, you have to learn who you are. I opened myself to a completely new world.

**What does it mean to you to hold the title of Miss Florida?**

It means everything. It's a huge responsibility and I feel so fortunate because not only do I get to represent the beautiful people of Florida, but I also get to represent the Hispanic community and anyone who has a dream and who wants to go for it. Because I had a dream but for so long I sort of put it on the back burner. And when I finally got to do it, I realized that you should always fight for your dreams because they do come true. They can come true if you put the work into it.

**What are your priorities in your role as Miss Florida?**

Just to empower women from all walks of life. And to let them know that they're incredibly strong and incredibly powerful — that doesn't just go for women, but anyone.

One of the things that I really want to do is visit Shriners Children's Hospital because when I was 13, I was diagnosed with scoliosis. So I had to wear a back brace for my entire high school career. I was treated at Shriners Hospital, so I would really like to return as Miss Florida, and just provide the children there with my support and even maybe take a team of UCF students over there to just spend a day with them and talk to them about different science topics and just get their curiosity sparked in that field.

**What do you wish people knew about you?**

I'm a hard working person and super friendly. I can be shy sometimes, but I'm someone that loves to help out, and someone you can count on.