

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

BALD IS BEAUTIFUL MISS AMERICA FINALIST TAKES ALOPECIA CAMPAIGN TO CATWALK

Along with the dazzling evening wear, quest for world peace, and enthusiasm for travel, nothing epitomises Miss America like a head of perfect, shiny hair. But if the hair of one contestant in this weekend's final round of the beauty contest looks a little too perfect, she has a good excuse.

For Kayla Martell, 21, who is entering as Miss Delaware, is bald, and her luxuriant blonde locks are a wig. "People always assume when they see a girl like me who is bald, that she is either very, very sick, or just ageing. I am neither," said Miss Martell, who has entered the contest to raise awareness of alopecia areata, a hair loss condition.

Miss America, which is holding the final of the annual competition in Las Vegas, was first convened in 1921 by American newspapers as a way of improving circulation figures. Today, the contest features a "platform concept", requiring contestants to promote an issue of personal significance.

Miss Martell, from Milford, Delaware, first began to lose her hair at the age of 10, and was taunted at school. "It started to fall out in the centre of my parting, and then the parting started to spread. Eventually I had a glorified mullet - hair at the back and no hair on the top," she said. The condition is believed to be caused by an auto-immune

disorder, in which the body attacks its own hair follicles and suppresses hair growth. Other sufferers include David Duchovny, *The X-Files* actor, Telly Savalas, the *Kojak* star, and the comedian Matt Lucas.

Miss Martell has wanted to enter a beauty pageant since she was four, and believes that keeping her ambition alive after developing the disease taught her resilience. "In many ways alopecia has been a blessing to me and I wonder if I'd be where I am today without it," she said.

Miss Martell will take a year off from Marymount University in Arlington, Virginia, to represent The National Alopecia Areata Foundation, which supports research into the condition, in her role as Miss Delaware.

Despite her insistence that "bald is beautiful", getting her message out via the catwalk required playing by the normal beauty contest rules. Miss Martell failed to enter the Miss Delaware contest three times without her wig, and only triumphed after being advised to wear a hairpiece.

She has five wigs to wear at different stages of the final.

But wigged or otherwise, she is never short of admirers. "I don't think most men care about my baldness - in fact, I think many are fascinated by it."

Jeff Maysh, Las Vegas



Kayla Martell wears a wig for the beauty pageant. 'In many ways alopecia has been a blessing to me,' she said



GLEN MCCURTAIN/COLEMAN BAYNER

Offering hope to Zimbabwe's most destitute

PETA THORNYCROFT
in Bulawayo

AS THE great-great-granddaughter of one of imperial Britain's greatest African foes, Sandra Gumede must see the irony.

Lobengula, her illustrious ancestor, spent the late 19th century fending off colonial advances into his Matabeleland kingdom in what is now western Zimbabwe.

Ultimately he failed, his tribal warriors cut down by British Maxim guns.

But today Mrs Gumede works with the British, or at least with a British charity in the form of Zane, set up in 2002 by Tom Benyon, the former Tory MP, to help the

ever-swelling ranks of destitute Zimbabweans, black and white.

At another moment of great crisis in her people's history, it seems only right - as her ancestor did before her - to rally to their need.

So, at 3am, Mrs Gumede is up and cooking maize meal in a council hall in Pelindaba, an overcrowded suburb of Bulawayo, the "City of Kings" that was once Lobengula's capital.

It is an early start but she has little choice in the matter; Zimbabwe's daily power cuts make a lie-in all but impossible. Soon the corridors are thronged with playing children who have come to the council hall with their grandparents, penniless pensioners

for whom Mrs Gumede is the only hope of a hot meal.

The children are mostly orphans, whose parents were carried off by the Aids epidemic that has swept Zimbabwe, where as many as one in six of the adult population is infected with HIV.

Maize meal, known in Zimbabwe as sadza when it is cooked, is the country's staple food. But after years of hyperinflation and misrule that have consigned this once prosperous nation to mass impoverishment, it has almost become a luxury for many.

As one element of its work in Zimbabwe, Zane provides maize meal and soya to the very old and the very young.

One of the beneficiaries of the feeding scheme is Thabani, a former teacher who lived in rural Matabeleland until 1985 when he was forced to flee President Robert Mugabe's brutal suppression of Matabele dissidents and their suspected sympathisers.

It was the height of what became known as the Gukurahundi, and in nearby villages the dreaded, North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade was carrying out mass executions, forcing villagers to dig their own graves before mowing them down with machine-gun fire.

For Thabani - whose best guess is that he is 69 - Mrs Gumede's sadza is, like for so many others, quite possibly the difference between life

and death. "I would die without this food, which I collect every day of the week," he said. "It is cooked. I have no money for electricity even when it is on. At weekends, it is a problem to get food. Often I am very hungry on Monday."

Thabani does not believe there is any immediate prospect for an improvement in the lives of ordinary Zimbabweans while the present government is in power, making the role that Zane plays in his life even more important.

"We know what has happened in Zimbabwe," he said. "We know why we are hungry. No one here will support Mugabe in any elections now." He continued: "I don't know this British organisation who send money for the food for us, but please thank them. We would die without it, so would those children over there."

Having one hot meal a day gives the children a future, and some hope - a precious commodity in Zimbabwe.

Others in Zimbabwe, however, do not want to consider what the next few years, even months, might bring.

Lorna Webb is one of Zimbabwe's white victims. She hasn't been oppressed politically or singled out for violence. But, like countless others in modern Zimbabwe, she is penniless.

A distinguished Zimbabwean - her father was Sir Thomas Page, a one-time pioneering farmer - she lived her life with characteristic prudence. After her husband died, she sold the family home as a way of supporting herself into old age.

Instead, she was reduced to penury as her savings were wiped out after Mr Mugabe's policies of seizing white-owned farms contributed to inflation so severe that prices were doubling every day.

It is hardly surprising that Mrs Webb is not relishing the prospect of turning 100 later this year. In fact, she just wants to die.

"I am 99 now and my body is worn out," she said, speaking from her bed in the frail-care section of a Harare old age home. "I have lived too long, and I want to move on to

the Lord now." For Mrs Webb, Zane has been a source of precious comfort since she was taken under its wing last June when she broke an arm and a leg.

Until then, despite her age, she had lived an active life, walking every day and enjoying considerable independence at the home.

Being confined to a bed is difficult for a woman who has seen so much. Her father, whose story she tells in her book *Chintali* ("tall man" in the Chinyanja language), was once speaker of the Legislative Council in Zambia, or Northern Rhodesia as it was known then. Knighted in 1956, he arrived on the African coast at the age of 19 and walked across the bush for nine weeks



Sandra Gumede, a descendant of a great warrior leader, works with Zane, the British charity, in Zimbabwe

to reach Nyasaland. In many ways, her life has been just as adventurous. Born in then Northern Rhodesia, she and her sister had long and difficult journeys to school in Southern Rhodesia and were parted from their parents for a year at a time.

Mrs Webb trained as a nursing sister in Southern Rhodesia before spending the early years of her working life in the forests of eastern Zimbabwe, where she functioned more as a doctor than a nurse, often having to perform operations when the missionary doctor was away.

She also nursed in Johannesburg, South Africa, for 15 years, and retired as a deputy matron.

As she prepares to make her final journey, Mrs Webb has no family around her. Zane fills that gap, its carers and volunteers providing attention and companionship for a dying woman.

In a clear voice, Mrs Webb reaches out her hand, searching for the Zane carer next to her. "Thank you for coming to see me," she said.

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Text for the day

LET THE heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; and let men say among the nations, The Lord reigneth.

1 Chronicles 16. 31

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