

Leather & Lace

Vermonters Bill Cross Talks About Becoming Mr. Empire State Leather

By CATHY RESMER

Even members of queer community are apt to find leather a bit intimidating. There's something primal and a little unsettling about people covered in the skin of another animal (even if it's just a cow). There's the sexual fetish element right out there on public display. And, like drag, leather plays with exaggerated gender roles. Men dressed in leather exude a hyper-masculinity that some people find a little, well, scary.

It seems ironic, then, that leathermen would compete in beauty pageants but they do. The website for the American Brotherhood Weekend, an organization of leathermen and -women, sounds eerily like the Miss America pageant: "a leather title represents not only our erotic expression, community involvement and leather knowledge, but also our ability to speak out on issues affecting our community."

In April, Hinesburg resident William Cross won the Mr. Empire State Leather Contest, held at the Phoenix Club in Albany, NY. This year there were three contestants – the International Mr. Leather event in Chicago over Memorial Day weekend drew a mere 52. Cross entered as "Furbie," referring both to his cuddly demeanor and his abundant body hair. Most of his fur remains hidden beneath a loose white shirt and his tight black leather pants when he sits down for an interview at Burlington's R.U.1.2? Community Center to explain the world of competitive leather.

OITM: What does it mean to "do" leather?

Mr. Empire State Leather: The old preconception of leather is hard-core S&M bondage, but I'm not into as much of the hard-core S&M type leather events. I just love the feel of leather on my body. I've been doing leather for about a year now, and in that year, it's actually been my shield, my protection. I'm kind of a shy person, so putting the leather on, it brings me out of my shell.

OITM: How much leather do you own?

Mr. ESL: Probably 20-25 pounds. It's quite heavy, so that's not a lot, but it's enough. I have jackets, vests, chaps,

pants, belts. I have a biker belt made out of motorcycle chain links. And of course your accessories like your gloves and your armbands.

OITM: Can you describe your character, Furbie?

Mr. ESL: I'm kind of a teddy bear. It's weird, because 'teddy bear' and 'leather' aren't quite the same, but I'm very open, I'm very caring, very loving person. I think that's why the judges might have gone with me, because they saw that soft side of me. I have the leather as my exterior, my solidness, but my inside, my heart, is the softness. If you want to put it in an easy term, I'm a leather and lace type of person.

OITM: What events make up the Empire State Leather competition?

Mr. ESL: There were seven parts ... I had to write a personal ad. There was an interview behind closed doors, a formal-wear competition, a hotwear competition, where you come out in whatever you look hot in. I was in chaps, I had a thong on, and I had a harness on. And that's all I had on. So you could see pretty much most of the hair on my body. They were all in heaven seeing that much hair. There's also a speech, and a question and answer session in front of the audience, and the fantasy.

OITM: What does the "fantasy" entail?

Mr. ESL: Mine was a puppy role. What the puppy role would be, you're taking somebody else's commands, and you're acting like a dog. They tell you to bark, and you bark. They pour beer in a bowl and you lick out of the bowl. People might pet you. You might have a leash on and people might walk you around. The fantasy is...the leather's way of putting on a show, like a drag queen would put on an act, but it's more of a play.

They also had a brotherhood award, which is kind of like the Miss Congeniality award ... They give it to somebody who helped out the most over the weekend, somebody who helped out the other contestants ... I won the brotherhood award, too.

OITM: Why did they give it to you?

Mr. ESL: It was a three-way tie. We



have what's called a Den Daddy. He makes sure we're going out on stage when we need to. I think he might have made that switch to give me the award. I think he saw what my heart, my soul really was, and that's why he chose me.

OITM: You've got another competition coming up next April, for the national title. What are you going to do to prepare?

Mr. ESL: Well, I've got Mr. Empire State Leather 2003, he's been through the competition, so he's going to gear me on the questions, and gear me on what I need to know. Then I have some other leathermen who want to push me to get the right physique. They're going to push me on how to do a fantasy that's going to be overpowering, that people are going to love.

OITM: What's your goal as Mr. Empire State Leather?

Mr. ESL: First and foremost, my goal is to get the leather community known a little more. It's kind of lost a lot of its charm. I want to let people know that it's okay if you're into leather. You don't have to be into the S&M part. The leather's a look. It's how you feel about yourself.

OITM: How many people are in the unofficial leather community of Vermont?

Mr. ESL: In this local area, I've come up with probably 40-50. You wouldn't know it because there's no organization.

OITM: So how should people address you?

Mr. ESL: I just let people call me Furbie. I'm fine with that. You can call me Mr. Empire State. Mr. ESL is fine.

OITM: What do you do when you're not wearing leather?

Mr. ESL: I work at a bank. ▼

Mr. Empire State Leather is available to appear at fundraising events. Email him at: MrESL2004@aol.com. Cathy Resmer is a freelance writer who lives in Winooski.

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