

I'VE BEEN SO BLESSED

Penny Coelen-Rey, SA's first Miss World, opens up about losing her son and husband, the joy of family and the start of a new chapter **BY JANA VAN DER MERWE**



LEFT: Penny Coelen was crowned Miss World in 1958 with Miss France Claudine Auger (left) as first princess and Miss Denmark Vinnie Ingemann (right) as second princess.



It's been more than six decades since she was crowned the most beautiful woman in the world and she's been out of the limelight for some time since. Yet when she's out and about she's still recognised by those who saw her being crowned as South Africa's first Miss World.

"People still ask me for autographs all these years later," Penny Coelen-Rey (81) tells YOU.

We're catching up with her at the Zululami Luxury Coastal Estate near Ballito Bay. She's been living alone at a nearby eco estate for the past 16 months but will move to the Coral Cove retirement facility being built at Zululami when it's done.

"I have a lovely home but living on my own is not much fun," Penny says.

Her husband, Micky, died in 2019 after battling cancer and dementia. They were married for nearly 59 years.

She's looking forward to moving to the retirement village. "It will be like living in a residential area, but you have the security of frail care, dementia care and a community centre with restaurants, a coffee shop and a pool.

"My friends will also come live there and life will carry on for you when you don't know who you are," she says with a chuckle. Then on a more sombre note, "You don't know when that will happen to you."

SHE'S had a full and happy life – but also had to deal with plenty of sorrow.

The former beauty queen, a mom of five and grandmother to 15, lived on a sugarcane farm on the north coast of KwaZulu-Natal when her kids were growing up.

She had to deal with great tragedy in 2003 when her middle son, Nicholas – then 39 – fell off his horse in a freak acci-

dent. He suffered a severe brain injury that left him paralysed and unable to speak until his death 12 years later.

Three years later, Micky died, soon after his 89th birthday.

"It was difficult," Penny says. "It's a very lonely existence if you've lived with somebody for so long. But that's life."

At the time of his death they'd sold the farm and were living in a house on the Zimbali Coastal Estate in Ballito.

When Penny became a widow she moved to a three-bedroom house at the nearby Simbithi Eco Estate.

Working on the interior has kept her occupied, as has spending time with friends, she says.

"You must have something to get up for in the morning. Now I play bridge, I do art, I play golf. Family is wonderful of course but the children and grandchildren have also got their own lives."

Her eldest son, Michel (60), lives in Cape Town while Jean-Paul (59) and Dominic (53) are in Johannesburg and Christopher (52) lives close to her in Mount Edgecombe near Durban.

Penny's beauty queen titles opened many doors for her but she put everything on hold after Nicholas' accident.

He'd been married for six years at the time and he and his wife, Gayle, had two young daughters, Bianca (then 3) and Olivia (then 2).

"It's been quite sad for them," Penny says. "I've had a lot of sadness in my life," she says, dabbing away tears.

Penny travelled to America in her quest to get help for her son, but the family were told that no amount of money could guarantee Nicholas a better life.

Her eyes fill with tears again.

"It's like you drop a glass vase and it smashes to the ground – you can never put it back together again."

"Nicholas couldn't talk, he was fed through a tube in his stomach and had a tracheostomy (opening in the windpipe). But he knew everything that was going on. He'd blink in acknowledgement and he could mouth words."

It took him a week to mouth words to a nurse for a speech that he wanted to have read at his parents' golden wedding anniversary.

"It was a lovely speech," Penny says. "He remembered me on the farm and how my nickname was Black and Decker because I was such a drill [sergeant]."

Her kids often joked about the iron-fisted way in which she ran their home, Penny explains, her laughter filling the

room again.

T'S clear Penny relishes her treasure trove of memories. She remembers winning her first beauty queen title – it was in early 1958 that she was voted Miss Margate – and later that same year she'd also snap up the coveted titles of Miss South Africa and Miss World.

She was a secretary with a Durban firm of architects when she entered the Margate contest. "I didn't do much modelling but I had two friends who were models and they came second and third in the same competition," she says.

Her dad, Henry Coelen, an accountant, and her mom, Joyce, were both born in British Malaya (now part of Malaysia) and educated in England. Penny was born in the United Kingdom, but her three younger siblings were born in South Africa.

In her youth the family moved around a lot – from Sea Point to Swaziland.

Two years after being crowned Miss World, Penny married wealthy Mauritian farmer Michel Rey.



Penny and her late husband Micky with their son Nicholas, who was paralysed in a horse-riding accident at 39.

'I'VE HAD A LOT OF SADNESS IN MY LIFE – BUT I WON'T CHANGE IT FOR ANYTHING'

Before her marriage she'd dreamt of a career as a Hollywood actress.

"But I'd never even been an actress in the school play! So it didn't work out for me," she says. "I have been so blessed with a beautiful, united family. I won't change my life for anything."

She was a full-time at-home mom for 15 years while raising her five children. But with the arrival of television in SA in 1976, she got the chance to appear in commercials.

That same year she started her own beauty salon on the farm, even travelling to Japan for specialist training. And for seven years she was a sought-after public speaker. "My husband used to let me go to do my thing," she says.

She still looks amazing so many years after wearing the Miss World crown and we ask what her secret is.

Just a regular skincare regime with cleanser and a good moisturiser, which she sticks to faithfully, Penny tells us. "I could never go to sleep with makeup on."

Is she as strict about her diet?

"Do you want the truth?" she asks.

"Not really!"

As she prepares to celebrate her 82nd birthday in April, she hasn't ruled out romance.

"I think it's wonderful to share life with others. But I haven't met another Prince Charming yet."

Then she tells us about how a frog landed on her head recently when she was fixing the blinds on her patio and she chuckles. "Unfortunately he didn't turn into a prince." □



Penny with four of her five sons on holiday last year in Plettenberg Bay. From left are Dominic, Christopher, Jean-Paul and Michel.

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