MENTION the clothing industry’s Spring Queen competition anywhere on the Cape Flats and most people will know what you’re talking about. The annual event has been synonymous with the local clothing industry since the late 1970s and for many young women, whose days are spent working on the factory floor, it’s the night Cinderella goes to the ball.

Many have described going to the Good Hope Centre to compete against contestants from other factories as the “greatest nights” of their lives. And each year thousands of industry colleagues, family and friends join in their celebration.

It is in this spirit that the Centre for Curating the Archives is presenting the exhibition – Spring Queen: The Staging of the Glittering Pageant.

The exhibition is a celebration of the contest which has come to showcase the beauty, style and personality of the contestants.

Curators Dale Waskansky and Siona O’Connell say that with the harsh reality of factory closures and job losses, the pageant is truly beauty and with the local clothing industry.

“Everyone expected a certain girl to be in the top three, and she wasn’t. I just left it because I knew she was jealous, I didn’t let it spoil the experience,” says Abrahams.

Being part of the competition changed the direction of her life, says Abrahams. After Spring Queen, she entered other competitions and spent over a month modelling in Germany. “The experience was very nice, but I longed for home,” she says.

Last year, she gave birth to a baby girl, who has kept her home for the last nine months. But plans are changing. “When they called the names of the winners, I thought: ‘If it’s not me, it’s fine’. Then they called number 11. I thought so low of myself, I couldn’t believe that they actually chose me,” says Bird.

She was the factory’s first Spring Queen and since the event, has gained a sense of confidence. “When I became queen, everything changed. I now love going out, wearing make-up, and getting dressed up,” she says.

Reflecting on the event, Bird says: “We are not just any kind of woman. We are ladies. We also have that selflove, and selfworth.”

Farieda Ebrahim of Hanover Park entered the competition several times and was first named Duchess Overwear Spring Queen in 1994. Ebrahim eventually moved to another factory, Bonwit and says that at this point she had gained competition experience and knew what the judges were looking for. She decided to enter again and in 2002 claimed the Bonwit Spring Queen crown.

She remembers her dress for the Good Hope event – it was plain, but was made from black and gold fabric that cost R250 per metre. Ebrahim was named first princess at the Sactwu Spring Queen competition that year. She says she loves the confidence the pageant instilled in her. She now works for the Foschini Group in the design department, and still readily gets up on stage to speak to large audiences with ease.

Last week, Ebrahim walked through the exhibition ahead of the official opening, and on seeing her pictures, she said: “It makes me feel like a queen all over again.”

The exhibition opened on July 28 and will run until August 24 at Bertram House, Haddington Campus, UCT in Orange Street.