While it may seem inevitable that most women choose their mothers as their mentors, I feel I am no exception. When I reflect back on how I started my career in modeling and how I won two competitions, the Supermodel of the Philippines in 1991 and the Binibining Pilipinas-World in 1994, I cannot help but acknowledge that behind all the success and recognition is my mom, Ma. Victoria Cynthia Villarosa Subijano. She was really more than a mentor. She was a driving force and relentless influence behind my success as a fashion model and Ambassador of Goodwill.

During my awkward teen years when I was painfully shy and constantly embarrassed to be seen in public due to intense inferiority complex issues with my towering height, my mom never gave up trying to assure me that my uniqueness is a beautiful thing. She tried every possible way to boost my confidence through praise, constant advice. She even sometimes shelled out funds to enroll me in modeling programs so I could see my potential. We were in a constant struggle. She would envision possibilities while I preferred to hide in my shell. It did not help her that I had my father’s personality—stubborn and preferring to stay away from activities that drew attention. Somehow my Mom’s persistence paid off as I began to think about the “what ifs”. What if I did sign up with a modeling agency? What could I possibly lose? What if I did join this beauty contest? Would it hurt to try? Eventually I answered all these questions but I could not have done it without my mother.

Before my high school graduation, I received a letter from an alumnus of my school, Raymond Lontok, who was then an up-and-coming fashion designer and photographer. His words mirrored my Mom’s preaching. He said he remembered me as a person who appeared embarrassed about my height and looked sad from the
constant teasing of my schoolmates. He told me that what I have is really an asset and not a liability, and that if I only gave modeling a chance it would open doors for me. Then he wrote down his phone number and said he would wait until I was ready to call him.

But I did not call, and instead kept the letter even until I had relocated to California where I pursued my undergraduate studies. I told my mom about it and she too did not forget what Raymond wrote. In fact two years later during a trip to the Philippines, my mom dialed his number and conversed with him. She mentioned I was doing well in school and I had started modeling for local jobs but I was still afraid to go home to the Philippines in fear of my adolescent insecurities returning. Raymond was enthused to hear from her and the two made plans to convince me to enter a modeling contest called Supermodel of the Philippines. Three years later the story repeated itself as my mom and other important fashion personalities (Raymond Lontok, Joey Espino, and Louie Mamengo) coaxed me into entering the most prestigious beauty pageant in the country. Winning titles in both competitions threw me into a whirlwind of fame and experiences I never thought possible.

I cannot forget that during the 1994 Miss World Pageant, Mom took a leave from her work to fly thousands of miles to South Africa so she could be my sole fan in the crowd. Her very presence and moral support was enough to make me feel a winner. While I did not covet the crown, I was proud to place in the top ten among 96 contestants. More importantly, I witnessed the happiness and contentment on my Mom's face when she realized I had finally seen what she had been trying so hard for years to make me believe.

The doors of opportunities opened for me and with each experience, I continued to develop my personality. I learned how to act with grace, speak with assurance, and carry myself with confidence. Interestingly, these are the same qualities my mom possesses. The difference is that growing up, Mom did everything on her own; whereas I needed her help each step of the way.

Once in a while when we are together, someone comes up to us and asks her, “Are you Cara's Mom?” It seems so interesting to me because I feel that they should really be addressing me to ask, “Are you Cynthia's daughter?” If people only knew my history, they would give credit where credit is due and understand why the famous Bette Midler song,
“Wind Beneath My Wings” is the perfect metaphor of what my mom is to me.

Caroline “Cara” Subijano-Wong currently, she serves in management at a company that manufactures cardio medical devices and is a newscaster of The Filipino Channel (TFC) in the U.S.. She resides in California with her husband, Ken, and daughter, Ashley.