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Bello Sanchez: I Went from Skid Row to *America's Next Top Model*

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America's Next Top Model contestant Bello Sanchez always got noticed for his striking crystal blue eyes, but the attention wasn't always positive.

"I got bullied a lot," the Cycle 22 contestant, 26, tells PEOPLE. "I was always teased - even by family members - not just because of my eyes, but because of how I looked, how I walked, how I talked. Being androgynous, I always looked 'too pretty' to be boy."

Not deterred by his critics, Sanchez moved to Los Angeles at 19 years old to pursue modeling, with only \$200 and nowhere to go. He ended up living in the Skid Row area of Los Angeles.

"The house was so filthy that the carpet had maggots," says Sanchez. "I would not be able to sleep a full eight hours because the flies would wake me. I couldn't take a shower in there either because the bathtub would have maggots. I would have to sneak into high schools in the neighborhood and pretend to be a student [to shower there]."

For years, Sanchez worked temp jobs to support himself, until he decided to pursue modeling full time and took a road trip around the country, attending as many *Top Model* castings as he could.

"There was no sleep," he says. "It was just drive, audition, drive, audition. I knew I was going to make it. I knew I had to go on this casting call."

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Fortunately, Sanchez did make it on the show, but it hasn't exactly been smooth sailing for him. The L.A.-based model has butted heads with several other cast members, most notably Devin Clark and Mikey Heverly, with whom he had a heated standoff on Wednesday night's episode.

"I don't condone violence," Sanchez said of the incident, during which he confronted Heverly for disturbing his sleep while in an adjoining bed with fellow contestant Ashley Molina. "I'm not a physical person, but I'm a very vocal person, and I will not allow anyone to bully me. Mikey, the type of person he is, that's the same type of person that bullied me when I was younger, and I will be damned if he bullies me or talks down to me."

Sanchez also says he clashed with Clark because he rejected his romantic advances – not shown on camera – that occurred in the beginning of the season.

"Devin actually tried to climb in my bed several times, and I told him that I was not interested in that," he says. "That hurt his feelings, so that's how [our tension] started."

As the season progresses, Sanchez – who sees himself as his own biggest competition – says he tries to improve his modeling performance by focusing less on the drama in the models' house.

"I tune everybody else out as much as I can," he says of his strategy going forward. "I stop defending people, and I start minding my own business." ■