

'Service is her thing': Queen of Carnival 2019 is Britt Johnsen

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Kristi Johnsen and her daughter Britt, who is the 2019 Queen of Carnival, photographed Friday, Dec. 28, 2018 at their home in the Warehouse District. Photo by Dinah L. Rogers, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune

Last fall in New Zealand, Kristina “Britt” Johnsen was awestruck by the nature. (“It was absolutely the most beautiful place on the planet,” she said.) She was studying and learning. She was hiking. She was bungee jumping. She was opting out of skydiving. She was trying on a muslin of her Queen of Carnival dress.

Like her queenship, it fit.

The Queen of Carnival, who goes by middle name Britt, is used to a busy schedule. That will serve her well on Mardi Gras (March 5), when her day begins at 6:30 a.m. Her grandfather, Erik F. Johnsen, who was Rex in 1991, has told her over and over that it will be the “best day ever,” but by the end of the day, “your fuel gauge is on empty.”

He was one of a handful of people who was told about “my, I guess, reign,” Britt said, smiling and laughing shyly as she tried out the word, which Rex spokesperson King Logan assured her was correct.

The 21-year-old is a junior in the Peabody College of Education and Human Development at Vanderbilt University, where she gives campus tours and volunteers as a middle school mentor for Nashville Young Life. She began a leadership role within her sorority, Chi Omega, at the start of 2019, once she returned to Vanderbilt from her semester studying abroad at the Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand.

Johnsen applied for the program in January 2018. Two months later, she was in New Orleans for her spring break, discussing ball gowns for her debutante ball in Suzanne Perron St. Paul’s dress shop. Then the door buzzed.

Britt’s dad, Erik L. Johnsen, was in the neighborhood, she said, and came in with another man she had never met before.

“We asked them, ‘Well, what color can my dress be; is it allowed to be off-white or not?’ And the man with my dad said, ‘Absolutely not, that would be totally inappropriate. I can’t believe you’d want to wear white,’” Britt said.

Since debutantes customarily wear white, Britt said she thought the man with her dad had no idea what he was talking about.

“And then he said, ‘I really think your dress should be gold, to match this whistle,’” Britt said.

When the Rex captain pulled out the captain’s whistle, “I immediately knew,” Britt said.

She could hardly sleep for the next week, she was so incredulous and excited. Each morning, she’d wake up and ask her parents, the only people she could share the secret with, if the turn of events really even happened.

“I’m excited about it. It’s a good kind of different for me,” said Britt, who, smiling, said she is much more likely to be hiking or outdoors than in the full hair and makeup she’ll have on Mardi Gras.



Britt Johnsen, 21, is a junior in the Peabody College of Education and Human Development at Vanderbilt University, where she gives campus tours and volunteers as a middle school mentor for Nashville Young Life. Photo by Dinah L. Rogers, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune

At the dress shop on that March day last year, the focus turned toward Britt's Queen of Carnival gown, which meant reflecting on her late grandmother, Dolly Ann Souchon Johnsen. Dolly Ann, who later married Britt's grandfather, Erik F. Johnsen, before he was Rex, was herself Queen of Carnival in 1949, 70 years ago this year.

Britt's dress will also nod to the interpretation her cousin, Charlotte Lane "Lainey" Langenstein, made of Dolly Ann's dress when she was Queen of Carnival in 2015. Langenstein's dress echoes the chevron pattern of their grandmother's more so than Britt's does, she said. Hers will incorporate the chevron but also has beaded lace.

"As soon as she (St. Paul) pulled out the lace I was like, 'OK, we're using that,'" Britt said.

Most of the design work was done before Britt went to New Zealand in July and the beading was in progress. All that was left was to make sure it still fit, Britt said. So Kristi Johnsen brought the muslin, a first version of the dress, with her when she flew to New Zealand to visit her daughter.

Kristi is used to her daughter adventuring abroad. For every Mardi Gras in high school, Britt was in Guatemala on a mission trip to an orphanage instead of traveling to New Orleans with her family. (Though Britt was born in New Orleans, her family moved with her father's business, International Shipping Corp., to Mobile, Alabama, after Hurricane Katrina. Britt graduated from UMS-Wright Preparatory School there.)

Other students from her high school went on the trip, but Kristi told Britt no "about a thousand times." Her daughter was 13 years old at the time and didn't know many of the students going.

There was a last-minute cancellation, though, Kristi said, "and they called and said 'Please let her come.'" So off Britt went.

"I really was thinking, 'When she comes home, she's never going again,'" Kristi said. "And she got off the plane, and she said, 'Next year I'm bringing this and that.' You know, she was all excited."

Britt has done other service trips abroad and been a camp counselor at a couple camps in the United States. "Service is her thing," Kristi said.



Britt's rings are gifts from her aunt, mother and grandmother. She received the fleur-de-lis ring as a reminder of her New Orleans home while she was living with her family in Mobile. Photo by Dinah L. Rogers, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune

Between her trips and traveling from Mobile, which also fortunately has Mardi Gras festivities, Britt said, she was able to see plenty of parades in New Orleans and was a princess in Osiris in 2015 for the krewe's 100th anniversary. But this year will be her first time at the Rex Ball.

"I've watched it (the Rex Ball) on TV every year growing up, so getting to actually be there in a very special way is exciting," Britt said.

In addition to family members, including Britt's three older half-brothers, Niels and Austin Johnsen and Alex Porter, several of her friends from Vanderbilt are planning to come in town for Mardi Gras as well, since it is the school's spring break. Most will be surprised to discover Britt, known for sharing king cake with her friends in Nashville, is Queen of Carnival.

"When they find out they're going to be confused and excited, and not really know what it means," Britt said, but she's excited to share Mardi Gras with them in the much more family-friendly way that they may not be expecting.

Britt's grandfather is 93, and the already close pair can now connect about something new. He's showed Britt a scrapbook with old newspaper clippings and edicts and encouraged her to fully participate in all the festivities.

Since it is Britt's debutante year, her great-aunt on her mom's side gave her a crown ornament for Christmas.

"I don't care if you're queen of any ball, you're still the queen to me," she told Britt, "which is really sweet," she said. "She'll be most excited of them all for when she finds out about this."



Since this is Britt's debutante year, her great-aunt on her mom's side gave her a crown ornament for Christmas. She did not know her niece would be Queen of Carnival. Photo by Dinah L. Rogers, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune

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