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Students reflect on Rose Festival

Four UO undergrads recall their experiences as festival princesses

By Serena Markstrom
for the Emerald

They are not allowed to answer their own phones or open their mail. An adult must know where they are 24 hours a day. They give up the last month and a half of high school traveling around Oregon dressed in the same clothes as 13 others.

These are some of the ways a young woman's life changes when she commits to the Portland Rose Festival Court, part of Portland's month-long annual Rose Festival. The Rose Festival began on June 4 and includes air shows, auto races and parades.

Meet Humu Kim Jabbie, Aiyana Calicott, Alexis Uwagbae and Brandy Alexander. These four University undergraduates were members of the Rose Festival Court their senior year of high school. They said their experience on the court gave them the

confidence and organizational skills to help them succeed in college.

They are also members of another small University community of 224 African-Americans—1.3 percent of the total student body, according to the Office of the Registrar.

Many parents tell their little girls they are princesses. Each year the city of Portland reaffirms this notion for 14 young women. They each represent one high school and form the Rose Festival Court.

Keeping a 90-year tradition, the court is selected in the same manner each year. Gretchen Heilshorn, the public relations coordinator for the Rose Association, said the process begins each winter with a meeting of interested students. Once a student is selected to represent her school, the rest of the student's year is dedicated to the Rose Festival Court.

Generally, court members "do well in school, are involved and they do well in public settings,"

Heilshorn said.

Alexander, Jabbie, Calicott and Uwagbae were involved with student government, sports, church, dance and many other activities.

Once chosen, court members make more than 70 visits around Oregon and become local celebrities.

Calicott said it gave her a taste of fame.

"Before it I wanted to be famous, now I don't want to," she said.

Alexander said for the most part she liked the attention she got, but sometimes people made rude comments. One woman said to her, "wow, there sure are a lot of you guys on the court," referring to her race. There were three other African-Americans on her court.

That year the Rose Queen, who is selected from the 14 princesses, was also African-American. Alexander said half of the audience did not stand up to applaud the queen's coronation.

Despite the prejudice they encountered, they said the experience was a positive one. During the time on the court, members said they made friends that will last a lifetime.

Alexander and Jabbie received University scholarships geared toward minorities in addition to the \$2,500 Rose Association scholarship. Both are journalism pre-majors, and they said the University was a natural choice.

Uwagbae was originally attracted to the University's Clark Honors College but later left the Honors College to focus on theater arts. Calicott came to Eugene because she wanted to live in its quiet, mellow atmosphere.

Alexander is a freshman and lives in the residence halls.

"I like the sense of community here," she said. "It's not too large and not too small."

"Being a part of the Rose Festival not only helped me gain confidence, it also contributed to my success in school by helping me cultivate communication, time management and organizational skills," she said.

She recently joined Alpha Kappa Alpha, the first predominantly black sorority, established in 1908. She is involved with the Black Student Union and will be in Portland this summer for a fashion buyer internship.

Jabbie and Calicott are roommates, originally meeting on the Rose Festival Court. Jabbie is a member of the Student Orientation Staff and also active in the BSU.

"The Rose Festival has made me confident and made me aware of community service and its importance," she said. "If it wasn't for the Rose Festival I probably wouldn't be as outgoing or involved at the U of O campus."

Calicott is in the Gospel Ensemble. She modeled in the Alpha Kappa Alpha annual fashion show and performed at the Ebony Man Showcase.

Uwagbae was married in May and now lives in Springfield.

She said the Rose Festival was one of the best experiences of her life and it helped her mature faster. "It helped me to be more confident in myself," she said. "I can go out there and do anything."

Now that they have their privacy back, their memories of their time on the court will always be with them.

"Sometimes you smell the air and it reminds you of something," Uwagbae said of her Rose Festival Court experience. "The other day I opened the window, and I could smell it in the air."

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