

Beauty Reigns

Louisiana celebrates its queens



International Rice Festival Queen Kathryn Shea Duncan, right, shares a laugh—and a crawfish—with McKenzie Melancon, 2017 Breaux Bridge Crawfish Festival Queen, during a crawfish farm tour in Breaux Bridge. PHOTOS COURTESY OF KATHRYN SHEA DUNCAN

By Cheré Coen

Louisiana boasts more than 400 fairs and festivals throughout the state, celebrating everything from food and agricultural products to history and culture. Many of those events also include royalty—more than 100 queens, to be exact.

“With all the fairs and festivals in this state, we take it to the next level,” says Charlie Whinham, public information officer at the Louisiana Office of Tourism. “We have queens and royalty everywhere.”

On January 2, the Office of Tourism invited 22 women to ride its Celebration Riverboat float in the 134th Rose Parade in Pasadena, California. The riders included Academy of Country Music

award-winning singer Lainey Wilson, a native of Baskin; Amber DeFatta, a former patient of the Shriners Hospital who honored the hospital’s 100th anniversary; and 20 festival queens from around the state.

“It’s more tame than our parades,” says Jordan Ann Gallegos, who rode the float as the reigning Louisiana Shrimp & Petroleum Festival Queen. Instead of wanting to catch throws, California parade-goers wanted pictures with the queens. “A float with 20 women with giant crowns on their heads—that’s not something you see every day,” she says.

Queen for a Year

Kathryn Shea Duncan, of Crowley,

attended the International Rice Festival for years, once even singing on the festival stage. Her parents are fifth-generation rice farmers, and she has friends and family members who were crowned festival royalty. It was only natural she would compete to be queen, too.

“All I wanted to be was International Rice Festival Queen,” she says. “It’s a legacy. Rice is in my family, and I thought being queen was the next step.”

Women competing for the International Rice Festival Queen title must complete a private interview with judges, who typically are in the rice business. The women are grilled on the Louisiana rice industry and U.S. rice—where it’s grown, which varieties are used and other industry specific questions.

Every year's queen travels to the U.S. Rice Outlook Conference and the U.S.A. Rice Millers' Association Convention.

"As queen, you represent the whole United States," Kathryn says. "You really have to be on your A game."

Judges look for women knowledgeable about the subject of their respective fair or festival and passionate about discussing it with others, says Katelyn Calhoun, president of the Louisiana Association of Fairs and Festivals.

"Most importantly, we want the girls to know what they're representing," she says. "And we want the girls to care about what they represent."

For Jordan, who grew up in Morgan City, the annual Shrimp & Petroleum Festival was a part of her childhood, from dancing onstage when she was young to marching in the parade with the Berwick High School Band.

"I've grown up with this festival since as long as I can remember," she says.

Jordan, too, had friends crowned queen of the longstanding festival, and she looked up to those confident women. Last June, she was interviewed by festival judges who subsequently told her parents—but not Jordan—that she had won the crown. Jordan didn't learn she was the festival's 87th queen until the coronation ceremony in August.

Kathryn and Jordan were required to sign contracts spelling out requirements for everything from dress codes to attendance at certain events. Queens get invited to other festivals, so many times they travel on weekends throughout their royal year.

"It really is an every-weekend event," Jordan says. "I've been all over. And I don't see it as giving up every weekend. It's an honor to bring my heritage to all over the state."

"It's pretty intense," Kathryn says. "It's a job. I did 80 events in my year."

The upside to all the traveling is meeting city officials, touring destinations and making lifelong friends.

"We're in each other's weddings, in each other's lives," Kathryn says of her fellow queens. "We basically spend a year together."



Kathryn at the Mystic Krewe of Louisianians Mardi Gras Ball in Washington, D.C.



Kathryn joins Queen Cotton LXIV Tara Babin at the Gueydan Duck Festival.

Collecting Crowns

Some women don't stop at one crown.

Emily LeLeux, who now attends the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, started competing in pageants when she graduated high school. In 2017, she became Miss Breaux Bridge and was crowned the Erath Fourth of July Queen in 2019. In 2021, she won Miss Scott Boudin Festival Queen IX.

"I said I would do one, win one," Emily says. "That was all I asked God for, but I got bit by the festival bug."

Her experience serving as queen in three festivals increased her confidence and improved her communication skills.

"You're able to be something bigger than yourself," she says.

Over 10 years, Katelyn wore seven different crowns, including Miss Battle of Pleasant Hill—a Civil War Battle in which her ancestors fought. She was also the queen and is a current board member of the Louisiana Cotton Festival, celebrating the industry her family works in. Her last coronation was as the Lion's Club Port Barre Cracklin Festival Queen, representing the organization that helped her uncle receive eye surgery.

LEFT: Louisiana's Celebration Riverboat won the 2023 Showmanship Award at the 134th Rose Parade in Pasadena, California. Twenty festival queens rode the float with country music star Lainey Wilson and Lt. Gov. Billy Nungesser at the helm. **ABOVE LEFT:** Jordan Gallegoes attends the Mystick Krewe of Louisianians Mardi Gras Ball in Washington, D.C. PHOTOS COURTESY JORDAN GALLEGOS



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Travels

Occasionally, if the timing's right, festival queens will be invited to national events. Emily and Jordan were invited to ride in the Rose Parade, and in late January, they attended the Mystick Krewe of Louisianians Mardi Gras Ball in Washington, D.C.

Emily agreed that the Rose Parade was quite different from the parades back home.

"Parade-goers are just happy to see you, and they wave," she says.

At the Washington ball, the queens were presented in full train and mantle and marched through the ballroom to the stage.

"I looked out to all those people, and I literally cried," Jordan says.

The queens spent their weekend in Washington seeing the sights as well.

ABOVE: Emily LeLeux, 2021 Miss Scott Boudin Festival Queen IX, waves at the Rose Parade. PHOTO COURTESY OF EMILY LELEUX **BELOW:** From left, Carli Calais (2017 Duck Festival Queen), Tara Babin (Queen Cotton LXIV), McKenzie Melancon (2017 Breaux Bridge Crawfish Festival Queen), Kathryn Shea Duncan (81st International Rice Festival Queen), Sarah Saunier (67th Delcambre Shrimp Queen), Laeh Alexander (Miss Andouille 2017) and Hope Wilkins Becnel (71st Plaquemines Parish Orange Festival Queen) visit a strawberry farm in Ponchatoula.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KATHRYN SHEA DUNCAN

Jordan visited the Capitol and Arlington Cemetery. Her father is a history buff, so seeing the changing of the guard at Arlington was a big event for the family.

"It brought a lot of us to tears," she says. "It was a really touching moment."

Lifelong Skills

The skills one learns as a festival queen include perfecting interviews, speaking publicly and becoming more confident, says Kathryn, who works as the social

media director for Visit Lake Charles and was named Southeast Tourism Society's 2022 Rising Star of the Year.

"I am not the same person," she says. "It's a really, really good learning experience."

Katelyn agrees the process develops character, regardless of whether a contestant wins the crown.

"Even competing in pageants can really build confidence," she says. ■

