



Hi, my name is Gabrielle Heron and it is an honor to serve as the 2017 Danish Maid – especially since this past year, the world embraced and practiced the Danish custom of “hygge”, which celebrates simplicity and cherishes little moments in family, comfort, and food. I am excited to represent our Danish town as a Danish lifestyle custom receives worldwide recognition, and our little town once again takes time to remember and celebrate the Danish heritage and traditions on which it was founded.

I recently graduated from Santa Ynez Valley Union High School with high honors, where I participated in varsity soccer, and track and field. I've also been a part of my church's youth group and am on the student leadership team. I have worked in my grandfather's store, Nielsen's Market, for the past three years and this most recent year have been a math, science, and Spanish tutor. I will be attending Biola University in the fall, majoring in math to become a high school math teacher. I also hope to participate in mission trips to Spanish-speaking countries, in the future.

I've been dressing up and enjoying Danish Days with my family, since I can remember. Graduating from handing out the jelly for Aebleskiver, to actually making them, was a big step for me. I remember rushing from Saturday AYSO soccer games, tired and sweaty, changing into my costume and running into town to be a part of the festivities. I have the fondest memories of walking around with my sisters, Angelique and Christiana, and my cousins, Andrew and Natalya Nielsen, in our costumes, constantly being stopped and asked to have our pictures taken. It seemed very natural that it was our job to represent our town and we felt rather special. We would wander over to Solvang Park to visit the booths and play games, then watch the Vikings and the magic show. From the wood carver, to the dancing, music, and parades, Danish Days was a magical weekend that I always looked forward to.

I remember hearing stories of the time my mother was Danish Maid and seeing her beautiful dress, I knew that I wanted to someday be the same. Also, as a young girl watching the lovely Danish Maids in their spectacular costumes, I couldn't help wanting to be like them. It was so exciting when my older sister was named 2014 Danish Maid; then two years later, walking alongside my cousin, Natalya, when she was the 2016 Danish Maid. That is why it's so wonderful for me to be able to continue our family tradition, have the honor of representing my heritage, and celebrate together with my town this Danish Days.

I fell in love with my mother's Danish Days costume which was fashioned after a Danish wedding dress circa 1750-1900s, which I've been lucky enough to borrow for the past three years. So in designing my dress this year, I based it off of the same style as hers, copying the lovely lace sleeves and delicate trim and bodice. I chose the traditional Danish black and red for the colors of my costume. It's very sweet to be Danish Maid and to pay homage to my mother's costume, to truly follow in her footsteps as Maid. I believe she might be more excited than I am!

My family's roots run deep in this town. It started with my great grandfather Axel Nielsen, son of immigrants Marcus and Andrea Nielsen, from Mors, Denmark. Axel wanted to commemorate Grundlovsdag (Denmark's Constitution Day). So in 1936, Solvang Danish Days was born. At first, it was just for the local residents of Solvang, not a tourist attraction, but soon word got out about the quaint little town of Solvang and its celebration of its heritage. Now, people from all over come to join us in our festivities and admire our town; they enjoy parades, folk dancers, and a traditional Danish dish of Aebleskiver and Medisterpølse.

Another Danish Days tradition that Axel started was the Aebleskiver Breakfast. He was in charge of the Breakfast for many years until his son Roger, my Morfar (grandfather), took over. The responsibility was passed on to my uncle, Rodney Nielsen, who is still in charge of the Breakfasts,

today. My great uncle, Don Nielsen, had the honor of being chairman of the Danish Days board in 1953, and my Morfar in 1971. Also in 1971, my great grandparents Mr. and Mrs. Axel Nielsen were the Danish Days Grand Marshals. My grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Roger Nielsen, were also the Grand Marshals, in 2010.

My Mormor (grandmother), Ann Nielsen, had the distinction of presiding over Solvang's 50th anniversary festivities in 1961, as official greeter, even though she is Norwegian. They dressed her up in a Danish costume to help host the events. And so started the idea of having a Danish Maid. My mom, Betina Heron, followed in her footsteps and became Danish Maid in 1988. When my mom married my dad, Paul Heron, he too became involved in Danish Days. Every year he and my uncle help set up the booths and Aebleskiver Breakfast pavilion. My whole family helps to serve Aebleskiver and is involved in the entire weekend.

Two years ago I had the privilege of visiting Denmark with my family. It was a unique experience to feel right at home, miles away. Solvang has truly captured the charm of its motherland through its architecture, food, and community. They say Denmark is one of the happiest countries in the world, and I hope you'll be just as happy celebrating with us this weekend in our little California slice of Denmark.