



My name is Natalya Nielsen and I am deeply honored to serve as Solvang's 2016 Danish Maid. Since a very young age, I have been dreaming of becoming Danish Maid. I would proudly wear my 'Future Danish Maid' sash in parades and while serving breakfast, waiting for my turn. Now, it is an absolute privilege that I have the opportunity to represent my heritage, family, and town in such a special way.

The Nielsen family has been in Solvang for quite some time and has been a part of many, many Danish Days. In fact, it all began in 1936 when my great-grandfather Axel Nielsen, wanted to celebrate Denmark's Constitution Day in town and started the unique festival of Danish Days. Axel was the son of immigrant parents Marcus and Andrea Nielsen, from Mors, Denmark, who helped settle Solvang in 1911. Since Marcus, my family has always been deeply rooted in Solvang. Danish Days started as a celebration for the locals in town, but soon it began to grow as more and more people wanted to participate in the town's special celebration. Now, Danish Days is a weekend of fun for people from all over and a chance for the locals to show off our Danish roots.

At Danish Days, æbleskiver and medisterpølse are served for breakfast in the middle of town, a tradition started by Axel. He was in charge of the breakfast for years until my grandfather, Roger Nielsen, took over. Now my father, Rodney Nielsen, is the breakfast chairman. It has been evident to me all my life that the Niensens have Danish Days in their blood, and I couldn't be happier.

I was born July 14, 1999 -- two months later in September, I was at my first Danish Days. When I was one year old, I wore my first Danish Days costume from Elna's Dress Shop. At the age of eight, my family from Norway sent me a Norwegian bunad, the traditional dress of Norway which shares many characteristics with that of the traditional Danish costume. I wore a bunad until the age of thirteen when I started wearing one of my grandmother, Ann Nielsen's, old dresses. This year my dress is inspired from the traditional costumes from where my family originates in Mors, Denmark. It is handmade by Roberta Skidmore who was able to incorporate old lace from my great-grandmother, Margaret's, apron into my cap and an old neck collar from one of Margaret's dresses into the sleeves.

All of my life, my family and I have participated in the Danish Days festivities: from attending the opening ceremonies and the candlelight parade on Friday night, to helping serve and make breakfast in the morning, to roaming around town and enjoying the fun. My cousin, Angelique Heron, was the Danish Maid in 2014 and my aunt, Betina Heron, was the Danish Maid in 1988. My grandmother, Ann, was the first to represent the Danish Maid in 1961. My great uncle, Don Nielsen, was chairman of the Danish Days board in 1953 and my grandfather, Roger, was chairman in 1971. Also in 1971, my great grandparents, Axel and Margaret Nielsen, were the Grand Marshals, and years later in 2010, my grandparents, Roger and Ann Nielsen, were the Grand Marshals. My father, Rodney Nielsen, has volunteered for Danish Days for the last thirty years helping with setup and takedown. He has served on the Danish Days Foundation Board for the last eleven years and served as co-chair of the board in 2013. Danish Days is truly a family affair.

I was born and raised in Solvang, and I am currently a student at Santa Ynez Valley Union High School. I am occupied with honors and AP classes as well as performing in the high school plays, and serving as President of the high school's theatre club. I am also Vice President of the YMCA's Youth and Government organization. On the weekends, I work at Nielsen's Market, the family business. My brother, Andrew Nielsen, is a freshmen at the high school, and he currently stays active by participating in basketball and volleyball. My father is the manager and president of Nielsen's Market and my mother, Nicole Nielsen, works at the market part-time as well as being a full-time at-home mom. I am so fortunate to be able to call Solvang my home.

I am so proud of my family's history in Solvang and Danish Days. Being able to represent them and the wonderful volunteers who make Danish Days possible is my greatest pleasure and honor. I hope you all have a wonderful time at the 2016 Danish Days festivities. *Skål!*