Musician reflects on how S. Tahoe shaped her



Nikki G credits her Tahoe roots for her music success. Photo/Callie Giovanna

By Jen Marchain

Henry David Thoreau said, “Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. Live the life you’ve always imagined” – a simple sentiment so often difficult to achieve in such a consumable world of distraction and strife. But for South Lake Tahoe native Nikki Grant, she is keeping it real and all in perspective.

A rare soul, Nikki G (as she is known) is an artist and powerhouse percussionist, performing in front of thousands of people in acts like Street Drum Corps, Katy Perry, 30 Seconds To Mars, Family Force Five and many more. She’s charged toward

her dreams with wild abandon, successfully connecting her creative ideas to its intended target while all the while never losing sight on the foundation that got her there in the first place – her spirit of family and home.

Tell me about your first memory of playing music?
Nikki G: On the long stretch of California driving from Northern California to Southern California, my family would fill the eight-hour journey with car songs and show tunes. I had a part specifically designed for the young age of 1, 2, 3 and 4. I remembered by the age of 4 being excitably anxious as my family sang a capella harmonizing to songs like "Winter Wonderland" and waiting patiently to add my musical contribution.
As I entered the world of ensembles I remember my first elementary school concert, specifically the moment when the band director announced me as the youngest member. I was so small that when I was introduced I had to lift my mallet high above from behind the concert bass drum in order to be recognized.

Q: How influential was music in your family?
A: I was born straight into a musical family starting with the matriarchs, being my grandparents. Their children who would soon have children and then great-grandchildren made the musical family ignite. Even most of those married in were musicians; there was never a dull moment at family reunions. Some refer to my family as the new age, "Partridge Family."

Q: What was it like growing up in Lake Tahoe?
A: The beauty that surrounds those who are born and raised in Lake Tahoe is immeasurable and somewhat distracting. In any upbringing it's only a matter of time before you start to discover there's an outside world. The enrichment that Tahoe provides from the education system, the outdoor education and the closeness of the community is part of the fuel that gave me, a small town girl, the courage to set out and capture the dream.

First and foremost my musical family gave me my foundation in music and in life but the Lake Tahoe Unified School District arts program further fostered my hopes and dreams. The music program gave the essential environment needed to not only prepare me for my future career but truly gave me an outlet that fostered my life's dream. Not only did my family and friends support my musical likings but so did my band directors as did my peers. I was very fortunate to be known in my community as, "The Little Drummer Girl."

I cannot emphasize enough on the importance of arts in the community of South Lake Tahoe. I know for a fact my life could have been drastically different and I can guarantee many of my musical/art program peers would feel the same. There are a handful of us out in the world making our musical dreams come true and I hope there are many generations after us that can state the same affirmation.

Q: Who were your earliest mentors?
A: My earliest and most important mentors were my family members, offering a vast variety of everything from classical pianists, musical directors, band directors, percussionists to DCI Drum/Bugle Corps.

My mother and father took great care to foster and nurture my musical journey, teaching me the foundations of music while doubling on piano and percussion. I was very fortunate to have the best of two worlds, my mother being a classical pianist and my father being a musical director/vocalist. I was not only able to receive a high education in music, but I had many outlets to express my art through recitals, festivals, musicals, and much more. In fact, my first experience on the road, at the age of seven, touring was with my parents performing in the musical "Godspell".

As I branched out beyond my family, I was very fortunate to be able to work with many phenomenal musicians and instructors. Some of which were band directors JJ Clause, Linda Kurek and

drum instructor Eric Hellberg who still provide richness in the arts to the community of South Lake Tahoe. I also had the rare opportunity to work under the direction of one of the greatest mentors of my musical life, Brian Farnon, who worked with many of the musical greats such as Spike Jones.

Every person, and many more, plays an important role in the community of South Lake Tahoe. They have all supplied generations with the vast knowledge of the arts that ended up to be the start of many musicians' careers, including my own. With my mother and father reaching into their fourth decade of commitment to the community and many more who have dedicated with them and before them, South Lake Tahoe is a resource that will become a great example of the benefits of the arts not only in the education system but for all communities.

Q: What influences or inspirations (or experiences) did you gain in your childhood that pushed you forward in your career?
A: I can remember the very moment and the very place that I realized my dream. It was in the third grade on the playground at Tahoe Valley Elementary School, atop the metal igloo after school staring at the clear blue sky saying to myself, "I want to be a musician. I want to play in a band with all of my friends and help people feel happy." Even though the definition was childlike and I didn't have any knowledge of what that dream truly contained, my heart was set on sharing the healing powers I received daily from music with as many people as my lifetime would permit.

Q: What barriers have you faced in your career?
A: Coming from a small town I was able to have a lot of hands on experience through the arts, especially since Lake Tahoe was a hub for outside touring acts. I was surrounded by musicians two or three times my age, which became a very welcoming and fostering environment. Even though I was very blessed with an incredibly supportive family and community, nothing could have truly prepared me for the outside world. I had to merely experience stepping out of the safety bubble,

called home, for myself.

I not only faced the change in culture, the realities of the industry, but the nature in which it stood, which wasn't always a good nature.

Unfortunately the dream that shined so bright was being darkened by challenges I couldn't have foreseen. As time went by, traveling city to city, I couldn't have pre-determined the capacity of struggles, heartache and turmoil I was about to experience.

Every artist has a story, even when the media and the magic of Hollywood make someone seem like an overnight success, it's usually not true. If you take the time to find the real story, you'll see much more than the overnight magic; everyone has a story. I was on the road, making my story and having the highest highs and the lowest lows. I was adjusting being away from home, family and friends, which is still a hardship, but it's because of the support of all of those aspects that I wasn't beaten down by the, sometimes scary, outside world.

Even though the majority of the time I was faced with being the only female drummer, having to pass up amazing opportunities due to not being male, knowing no one, learning how to become street smart, facing fears daily, and feeling very overwhelmed; I truly believe my absolute love for music, the unwavering commitment of my supporters and my hometown brought me to where I am today, which is full of accomplished dreams. All of us have barriers in many different ways whether it's an internal or external factor. But I truly believe that each of us has some passion, a desire, something that pulls at our heartstrings and we only have one life to embrace the dream. Tomorrow is never promised, so live your dream today.

Q: Your album "heART" seems profoundly tethered to your soul. As an artist, how do you prepare yourself to create something so personal and why is it important for you to share it

broadly through art?
A: “heART” came about at a time of artistic struggle. I’d been experiencing a lull in my creative spark and I was coming to an age of realizing I had nothing to call my own. I wanted to tap into a part of musical soul, which had been left untouched. So I did what I thought was most beneficial, I took a summer off and went home.

Every time I would go home it would bring back so many memories from my past, especially since my parents left my childhood bedroom exactly the same. Going home for the summer not only put me in a supportive environment, but making my old room into a studio to compose was the best environment to feel safe enough to face my musical fears. Writing for any artist based on the naked truth within your soul is scary, especially when you have no idea what will come about. I had no clue; in fact I had trouble with the process for quite some time.

I’d worked so long in different groups, living in the Hollywood scene that I had somewhat been molded into what every different gig required and not allowed to flourish being just, me. At first I thought I’d write the next top hit or pop/rock song, well those were so forced that it made the process of composing got more frustrating. It wasn’t until I reached out to my parents that I started to truly tap into tethering my soul.

I remember my mom saying, “You can’t force yourself against what’s innately in you, if you just let the music naturally flow it will be perfect because you’ll be expressing the honest truth inside your heart.” My dad would sit down and make lyrics up, purposefully write a humorous song just to get me out of the boxed mindset and to instill one of the most important aspects of creating, which is the enjoyment of the process.

Without being home, without my parent’s guidance and my musical journey up until that point, “heART” wouldn’t have

existed. It was proof that all good things take time; you can’t rush the real deal.

I put myself in a safe zone, surrounded by those who could help me thrive whether musically or spiritually and from there on out I made myself one promise; to be myself, to hold no bounds, and to let my heart be heard.

Q: You’ve had a lot of success with the Street Drum Corp project. What other things are you working on these days?
A: I’ve had the pleasure of working with Street Drum Corps for the past eight years; it’s been quite an adventure.

I never thought I’d be touring the world, playing for thousands, let alone being on television doing what I had been doing with close friends at South Tahoe High starting at the young age of 15. I created a Trash Can Trio at South Tahoe High and we quickly became the feature at rallies, games, concert and events. We also occasionally got in trouble for making loud music is how I would choose to describe our sound of metal trash cans, poles, fences, etc., around campus. I could have never foreseen making a living off of what was construed as ruckus, chaos, but all in the same, music.

In the music world I’m defined as an independent artist or freelance artist, which allows me to work in many different projects. I’ve played with many acts in and around the Los Angeles basin, have worked in the studio recording everything from albums to soundtracks, and have even had the privilege of composing and performing on the big screen for an internationally released commercial for the Starz Channel. All in all, I believe an artist’s life never stands still and as time progresses so will my projects. The artist never stops; it’s a blessing and a curse.

Q: What is the overall message you hope to convey in your music and your style of playing?
A: I have a deep passion for music, no matter what genre or

what type of music I perform. My goal is to break the barrier we sometimes place between audience and performer because to me it’s not about the show, it’s about the story, it’s how the music makes you feel and the communication that has more power than you may realize, the power to unite. The message I’ve always tried to convey is the message of unity. Music is innate in each of us and I’ve experience and see the healing powers of music throughout my whole life.

Even as I stared up at the sky at Tahoe Valley Elementary School, with stars in my eyes, I could have never imagined all the dreams within a dream that have come true. I’ve learned that although you may have a dream, your perseverance and hard work will lead you toward the unimaginable. It happened to me it can most definitely happen to you. I feel very fortunate and proud to be from South Lake Tahoe and to be able to affirm that my dreams have come true, a dream that at one point seemed impossible. Coming from a small town one might think the possibilities are limited, but I hope that my life can be proof that no matter where you’re from life is limitless.